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September 5, 1882.

Vol. XI.

Single
Number.PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.Price,
5 Cents.

No. 267.

THE BUCKSKIN DETECTIVE; Or, CLAUDE CRECY, KING OF AMERICAN ROAD-AGENTS.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "NICK O' THE NIGHT," "HIDDEN LODGE," "NIGHTINGALE NAT," "OLD FROSTY," "DANDY JACK," "KIT HAREFOOT," ETC.



"LOOK HYAR, DAINTY DOT," SAID 'RAPPAHOB, "THAR'S A THOUSAND OUNCES OV DUST ON BUCKSKIN'S HEAD."

The Buckskin Detective;

OR,

CLAUDE CRECY,

KING OF AMERICAN ROAD-AGENTS.

A Story of Wild Men and Wilder Deeds.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "BILL BRAVO," "CAPTAIN APOLLO," "ARKANSAW," "GOLD TRIGGER," "CAPTAIN BULLET," "OLD FROSTY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"THROW OUT THE MAIL-BAGS."

"I THOUGHT I'd climb up here an' get a sniff ov wholesome air. No objections, I reckon?"

These words were addressed to the driver of the overland stage "Katy May," which, thirty miles out of Denver, was lumbering along over the roughest portion of the famous trail between that city and Salt Lake.

The speaker was a long-haired and handsome individual of twenty-eight or thirty, with a magnificent physique, and the keenest and deepest black eyes in the wild West. A broad-brimmed hat, not unlike a sombrero, gave him a Mexicanish appearance, and besides this, his face was almost dark enough to have proclaimed him the wayward son of some hispanic.

He was climbing to the driver's seat while he spoke, and before the man at the lines could reply he had appropriated a seat at his side.

It wanted an hour till day. The sky was still glittering like a diamond field, while in the deep gorges and valleys below the elevated trail, a heavy mist lay like a great damp shroud. Although it was the middle of the month of June, the morning air was cold and marrow-piercing, so cold, indeed, that Old Zack Dragon, the driver, had drawn a blanket around his legs.

"Grand view from these mountains at day-break, they tell me," continued the handsome stranger, somewhat perplexed at Zack's silence.

The answer was preceded by a quick, half-suspicious glance.

"Fine view for them what likes scenery," Zack said. "Ever been over the route afore?"

"Never."

The driver shrugged his shoulders as if to say "I don't know about that," but he did not question his passenger's veracity.

"The railroad's going to ruin your business," continued the stranger in the sombrero.

"Mebbe so, but I expect to leave the route afore many days. Been drivin' hyar ten years, and never upst a passenger."

A gleam of pride was in the glance Zack threw at the sharer of his seat as he spoke the last sentence.

"And never met a road-agent?"

"I can't say that, pard."

"Precious few drivers west of Denver can, they tell me."

"That's a fact! I war stopped two year ago about ten miles west o' hyar. I'll show you the spot when we git thar. Had eight passengers, the mail, an' a good deal ov private dust. About one hundred pounds ov my freight war a congressman's daughter goin' to Salt Lake. It war about this time in the mornin', an' all at once I found myself lookin' into six rifles poked over ther heads ov thet many hosses. The men hed white masks on, but I could see thet ther leader hed long hair jes' like yourn, pard. I halted, ov course, an' lost ther mail, ther private dust an' blamed nigh everything valuable."

"And your passengers?"

"Their hands went up ov course, and their pockets war emptied in a jiffy. Them six fellars rode off with a jewelry store. The gal from Washington begged, cried, an' then got mad. I've see'd mad wild-cats among the Rockies, but they warn't a patchin' to thet gal. She swore thet her father would introduce a bill inter Congress to hang the whole six without a trial, jes' ez ef fifty er sixty fellars in Washington could stop road-agents in Colorado!" and Zack laughed, while his absorbed listener smiled.

"They all got off with the booty—the road-boys, I mean?"

"What war to hinder 'em?" cried Zack. "Thar war thirteen revolvers in the stage, but nary a one war drawn. I war confounded glad to drive inter Salt Lake with eight live passengers an' no dead ones."

"The road-boys were never caught, I suppose?"

"I should say not!" drawled Zack, in a tone not very complimentary to his questioner's knowledge of Colorado life. "You hev'n't been long in ther territory, then?"

"About three weeks. I am going to Salt Lake for the first time; came from Tucson. We haven't had the road-agents down there yet."

"You'll git 'em thar; it's only a question ov time," said Zack. "We'd like to snip Claude Crecy to your kentry; got no use fur him in these parts."

"Is that his name?"

"Claude the Devil some call 'im. Thar hev been slick an' bold road-agents in Colorado, stranger, but he takes ther cake; he's ther king ov ther trail-robbers, ther boss ov stage-stoppers."

"Never saw him, I reckon?"

"No, but I've an idea what he looks like. I'd bet my last ounce ov dust thet he led ther six what stopped me jes' on ahead apiece, although he generally works alone."

"Not alone?"

"Claude trusts few men, I tell you. His 'Throw out ther mail' hez been heard more'n once in this region. He war in Denver once; a woman's face took 'im thar, an' strange to say, ther face ov ther congressman's daughter what war in my stage that time."

"No."

"Fact, pard."

"When was this?"

"It war a year arter ther accident; ther congressman war flat on his back, broke, an' his daughter came West ter hunt Claude up ter git back a watch she hed given over to 'im. He must hev heard she war in Denver, for he went thar. But he hed lost ther watch, so he said. The gal got huffy ag'in, an' blowed on 'im. Denver went crazy about Claude the Devil bein' in town; but he rode down street laughin', and not a man tried to stop 'im. But hyar we ar' at ther place I war goin' ter show ye," and Zack slowed the four horses into a walk.

The stage was now on the very summit of the mountain trail, and its right wheels were within two feet of the brink of a precipice whose base was a thousand feet below. Daylight was breaking and revealing the situation, which, for mountain scenery, was grand and beyond the power of pen or language to describe. The seven passengers on the inside were apparently asleep; if not, they were silently admiring, if lovers of Nature, their wild surroundings.

"What a place ter be stopped in, stranger," said Zack. "What ef the team hed reared an' thrown the stage off the trail? Jes' lean over an' see if ye kin see bottom down thar. Yonder's whar the six stood, an' over thar, close to that big bowlder, is whar we left the mail an' the dust. Nobody hyar now to repeat the trick."

"I am here!"

Did Zack notice the tone in which these three words were spoken?

"Of course ye'r' hyar, stranger," he said, smiling; "but Claude the Devil ain't, an' thet's comfort."

The last word had hardly left old Zack's lips when the stranger turned suddenly upon him, and a blow at the butt of the ear sent him reeling from his seat! The leathern lines fell from his hands, and were instantly clutched by his handsome assaulter, whose eyes were now glittering with triumph.

The terrible blow sent Zack clear of his seat, and with a half-stifled cry he pitched headlong over the precipice down—down to a horrible death. He had driven his last stage over the Salt Lake Trail; he had trusted a strange passenger too long on his seat before day.

The victor made use of the lines like an old stage-driver. A pull and a word that sounded wonderfully like Zack's accustomed "Whoa!" stopped the horses, and a leap carried the man to the ground.

In another instant the sharp "Halt!" heard so often along the stage trails of the Rockies, rung out clear and distinct on the morning air, and there was a bustling on the inside of the cumbersome vehicle.

A woman's scream was heard above the confused inquiries of half-awakened men, and the three persons who poked their heads out on the side where the doubly armed road-agent stood saw a sight that instantly caused three heads to be drawn in again.

With his sombrero thrown back, and his faultless figure at its true height, the handsome passenger of the "Katy May" stood near the stage with a cocked revolver in each hand.

"Stop that woman's mouth, and threw out

the mail—especially the little brass-bound sack under the lamp-box—quick!" came in stern tones from the man's lips. "Gentlemen, your personal effects shall not be disturbed unless my commands are not instantly obeyed. In that event, some of you will need wooden overcoats when you get to Salt Lake!"

There seemed to be a hurried consultation by the inmates of the stage.

"Give him the bags," said a voice, that made the road-agent start as if a man whom he hated had spoken. "They are Government property, and we are not guarding them. Toss them out."

The following moment three good-sized sacks fell with a thud at the robber's feet, and an instant later a smaller one alighted on the pile.

"Thanks!" said the road-agent. "Gentlemen, you've lost a driver, I'm sorry to say. Zack Dragon has gone to prospect at the bottom of the cliffs. However, do not trouble yourself about the team; the horses know the road to Salt Lake. I'll start them up and prove my assertion."

As he finished, he fired a pistol-shot toward the team, and supplemented it with a yell not unlike a Sioux war-whoop.

The next instant the four horses started on.

"Good-night, gentlemen!" shouted the highwayman. "Convey to Salt Lake the compliments of Claude Crecy, King of the Road!"

An oath and several cries of astonishment greeted his last words.

The stage had moved past him, but his revolvers still covered it.

Faster and faster went the horses along the dangerously-narrow road. The lines had fallen to the ground, and were being dragged over the stones.

In a minute, as it were, a slight bend in the trail separated the road-agent and his victims. The latter thought no longer of the daring man who had ridden twenty miles in their midst for the express purpose of stopping and robbing the stage. They were being hurried over the road at terrible speed. The horses were thoroughly frightened, and the vehicle was swaying from one side to another as if it would soon topple over the yawning chasm and carry all to doom!

At this juncture a man, one of the passengers, leaped from one of the windows, and swung his body round over the front wheel. There was no longer any lines; the sharp rocks of the trail had cut them to pieces.

By an agile spring he landed between the two hindmost horses, and jerked madly at their bridle reins as he passed on toward the leaders. No human power seemed equal to the awful emergency now at hand; but with compressed lips and eyes full of determination, the man threw himself upon the back of the most excited leader, and with a Samsonian wrench, threw him almost upon his haunches!

The rear horses were stopped in an instant, and when the man had controlled the leaders, the right wheels of the stage were on the very brink of the chasm.

In another instant it would have been thrown into the valley a thousand feet below!

The passengers still inside, six men and one woman, now sprung out and ran forward.

"Go back and get out the new lines under the seat inside," said the subduer of the team. One of you men must drive the stage on to Salt Lake."

"We must depend on you," was the reply.

"I am not going any further."

There was a cry of astonishment from seven throats.

"Gentlemen, I have business in these parts," answered the man, calmly. "When I say that one of your number must take the stage on, I mean that I stop here. One of you will carry to Salt Lake a message for me." And the speaker tore a leaf from a note book which he took from his pocket. "You will find Colonel Scott playing checkers at the Post office," he continued as he wrote, and a moment later he extended the message to the waiting men. "Give him this paper."

Prompted by curiosity all bent forward to see what the cool man had traced on the leaf which was not even folded.

They read these words:

"I've struck the trail at last. Tell Dot when you see her."

"FRANK."

"By Jove! you're a detective!" cried one of the men, looking up.

"Maybe I am," was the reply, as the man threw back his coat, displaying an elegant buckskin jacket. "You may have heard of me, gentlemen."

"I have!" exclaimed the woman. "You are Buckskin Frank, the Road Agents' Terror."

The detective smiled.

CHAPTER II.

IN GOLD GULCH CAMP.

The sun was setting upon the day that witnessed the last events recorded in the foregoing chapter, when a man entered one of the many mining camps or towns which at that time dotted the country between Denver and Salt Lake.

Gold Gulch Camp was the name of the place. There was nothing unusually striking in the man's appearance. He was commonly dressed in a half mining suit of dark brown ducking, wore his pants in his boots after the custom of the country, and sported a slouched hat of fine texture. Certain elevations under his coat or jacket told that he was not without arms. His face was covered with a short brown beard, over a part of which drooped a long mustache.

The denizens of Gold Gulch took no particular notice of this visitor, for of late the camp had been visited by many men, miners, prospectors, and adventurers, with no definite aim. The most of these, after tarrying long enough to lose their dust at a certain gambling den known all over Colorado, had departed to make another raise, when they were expected to return and—lose that also.

Gold Gulch was the roughs' Monaco of the wild West. If a "fair game" had been played within its precincts in two years past nobody ever knew it. What you put down you never took up, for the cards were always against you when the stakes were big or the game worth the candle.

A man named Rocky Rod was the proprietor of the den where nightly the devotees of gambling met and played mostly for money, but sometimes for hearts. Gold Gulch had a graveyard on the hillside, and many of its occupants had been carried "feet foremost" from Rocky Rod's.

"Ar' ye lookin' fur the Wheel ov Fortune, stranger?" asked a gray-shirted athlete, who was leaning against one of the shanties as Gold Gulch's visitor passed along on the evening in question.

"Not exactly," was the reply, and the person addressed came to a halt. "You have such an institution here, I understand; heard of it in Denver."

"That's what all the boys say what come from thar. A man could retire on Rocky Rod's reputation and money, especially on the latter. pard; fur ef he hezn't raked in more dust without a pick than any human west ov Dome Rock, jes' set Catamount Luke down fur a fool. I kinder fancy you, an' ez you're jes' from Denver, an' may want ter take a turn at the Wheel afore you leave camp, I wouldn't mind givin' ye a few lucky pints. Sha'n't cost ye nothin', pard. Everything's free in Gold Gulch, 'cep'in' whisky, an' thet's jumped up ter fifty cents a drink."

The stranger seemed to have plenty of time on his hands, and was not indisposed to form new acquaintances, for he went up to Catamount Luke and introduced himself as one Holloway, adding, with a smile, that his companions knew him as Fancy Fred.

The citizen of Gold Gulch held out a great brown hand, and proposed with a wink an adjournment to the interior of the shanty, where the two men took possession of the same number of rough wooden stools.

"I'm kinder in the ring, Fancy," began Catamount; "but I've hed a run o' bad luck in spite ov thet."

He then proceeded to give Holloway some information about the game at Rocky Rod's establishment, which was known as the "Wheel of Fortune." He was quite lavish with his pointers, and his listeners seemed to take them all with confidence. By degrees Catamount drew from his auditor the valuable information that he (Fancy Fred) had some gold which he would not mind risking at Rocky Rod's, whereupon a partnership was adroitly proposed.

Catamount Luke had lost some heavy sums, simply because he had not paid the strictest attention to the game, but he was certain that, with the pointers he had given Holloway, they could make a raise, and astonish the entire camp.

The man from Denver acquiesced with some show of enthusiasm, and the gambler at once began to make what he called his "toilet" for the evening. This consisted in the reloading of two immense navy revolvers and the donning of a twelve-inch bowie.

"You carry an arsenal, Fancy?" he queried, with a glance at the Denver man's person. "Jedgin' from yer eye, you don't travel through Colorado without any weepins."

"I'm able to take care of myself," was the

significant reply, which seemed to satisfy Catamount, for he led the way from the cabin.

Night was closing around Gold Gulch Camp, and the little cabins of its lawless citizens were becoming dark specters on every side.

A short walk carried the two men to the building which was the great attraction of the camp. A tin lamp in a glass case burned above the door, which was wide open, for in the far West no screens are needed: gambling is not carried on behind closed doors.

"Hyar we are, pard," said Catamount, in a low tone, as he conducted Holloway across the threshold. "Keep the 'pointers' in yer head, an' play accordin'ly. Now, we'll proceed ter rig up a game."

Fancy Fred offered no objection, and Catamount soon returned to the rough pine table, at which he had stationed himself with two men whom he introduced as "Mr." Starbox and Tom Watson, "commonly called Whirlwind Tom," supplemented Catamount.

Just why one of the men should be mentioned as "Mr." Starbox, and the other, really the most gentlemanly looking of the two, as Whirlwind Tom, was one of the mysteries of Gold Gulch to Holloway, until Catamount solved it by mentioning that Starbox had a brother-in-law in Congress.

It was Fancy Fred's advent into Rocky Rod's place, and he took in the scene that presented itself in a few glances. There were more than a dozen tables in the room, and apparently all the inhabitants of the Camp. A bar occupied one end of the den, and over the bottles was this roughly-painted legend:

"No Money, no Play, no Nothing!"

Whirlwind Tom dealt the cards for the little party of four. As Catamount had brought the Man from Denver to the "Wheel of Fortune," he was by courtesy allowed to be his partner, and the game proceeded. On every hand was heard the usual language of a place like Rocky Rod's, but Fancy Fred played coolly although the game had turned against him. Still he played on.

There was a strange glitter in Catamount Luke's eyes as "Mr." Starbox and Whirlwind Tom raked in stake after stake. He cursed the fickle goddess which had deserted himself as well as Holloway, and at last looked at the latter as if to say "Hadn't we better quit for to-night?"

The Denver man responded with an affirmative nod and got up.

"Through, mister?" asked Whirlwind Tom.

"For to-night."

"Pshaw! You quit jes' when Fortin's comin' back to you. Hyar goes fur another shuffle."

"Not for me, gentlemen," was the firm answer.

"I'm willin' to go on," said Catamount; "but ef my pard says quit, why ther game's bu'sted. I'll sw'ar thet ther game's been fair; but somehow er other my pard an' I hev hed a streak ov bad luck."

At the mention of a fair game Fancy Fred's eyes met Catamount's in a glance which, quick as it was, was caught by Starbox.

"We play the Denver game here I tell you," he said, with emphasis, fixing his gaze upon Holloway.

"Yes, the kind they play at Monte Phil's in that city."

"Who's been fightin' the tiger at Monte Phil's?" cried a man who sprung up from a table at Holloway's left. "I want ter see thet man ef he's played thar within the last month."

The next moment Holloway and the speaker stood face to face.

"Pardon me, stranger," continued the latter, "my name is Rattle—Death Rattle they sometimes call me. You have mentioned Monte Phil's in Denver. When war ye thar last?"

"Six months ago."

"Not since?"

"Not since."

"Oh! I thought you had lately left Denver?"

"I was there two weeks ago."

"And not at Monte's?"

"Not at Monte's."

Fancy Fred had a singular way of repeating last words as a kind of echo.

Death Rattle's eagerness seemed to end in disgust, for he sat down without thanking Holloway for submitting to his inquisition, and picked up the cards again.

"I'm through!" he cried a minute later, as he threw down his hand and leaped up. "I wonder where the Man from Denver is?"

The question he addressed to himself as his eyes swept the den in a circling glance.

But Holloway had vanished, and Catamount Luke was just re-entering the den.

Death Rattle started toward the door with an eagerness he did not attempt to conceal.

"Where's your pard?" he asked, as he stopped Catamount.

"I've jes' started him toward ther St. Apollo. He'll be back ter-morrer."

"I don't want to bleed him in your way," was the response, accompanied by a glance which was almost a defiance. "I hev business with him, an' thet afore he turns in."

Death Rattle sprang from the Wheel of Fortune as he spoke, and hastened down the street toward the two-story frame hotel which had been christened the St. Apollo.

He soon saw the figure of a man in front of him, and with a mental ejaculation of "That's the chap!" he increased his speed.

In another moment he was about to stop Holloway with his extended hand, when the Man from Denver whirled like a flash to the clicking of a navy's lock.

"I knew you would follow me," he said to Death Rattle. "I am ready for you, as you see. You are a man of many disguises, but a bullet can pierce them all!"

CHAPTER III.

KNIVES IN THE DARK.

"SOMEBODY has warned you since you left the Wheel of Fortune," said Death Rattle, after a moment's silence.

"No. I knew you the minute you got up and asked me when I was last at Monte Phil's," was the response. "Besides, who would warn me here? Not Catamount Luke, who slyly helped Mr. Starbox and Whirlwind Tom to my eagles. I'm a plucked pigeon in his eyes!" and the speaker laughed as he looked at Death Rattle.

"You heard me coming, then?"

"Yes, and I would have sworn it was you. I knew you would follow me, and that as soon as you could discard your 'hand.'"

"Shall we have it out here?"

"Just as you say."

"With the knife?"

"I'm not particular."

The Man from Denver was certainly accommodating, for, still gripping his revolver, he drew a bowie, which boasted of twelve inches of steel.

"I must have been asleep when you boarded the stage," he continued. "I give you credit for a good deal of cuteness, Claude, but couldn't you have settled Zack, poor fellow, without killing him?"

"I didn't kill him. He's alive to-night."

Holloway made a gesture of disbelief.

"No man falls a thousand feet and lives," he said.

"He didn't fall forty feet. He caught on to some rock bushes, and hung there until a lot of Indians saved him with a lasso. It was a narrow escape, and I'm really glad of it because Zack's harmless."

There was no reply to this.

Death Rattle was a man with more than one name. He already stood revealed to the Man from Denver as Claude Crecy, the daring road-agent whose robbery of the mail stage we have witnessed. And Holloway, too, was more than simply Fancy Fred, a name which he had spoken for the first time for Catamount's benefit; he was Buckskin Frank, the detective.

Thus disguised, but face to face the two men had met—the hunted and the hunter.

"Let us go up to Catamount's cabin," said Devil Claude after a pause. "You've been looking for me for two years, Buckskin. More than once I had you under my rifle, but though you are the greatest enemy I have, I did not touch the trigger. That was a foolish vow of yours—the one you made to Dot two years ago."

The detective started.

"You don't deny it; how could you?" resumed Claude. "When you left her, you vowed that you would see her no more until you had avenged her father's death. This morning after I left the stage upon the mountain, you stopped the horses which were actually running off, and sent a message by the passengers to Colonel Scott. In its one line you told him to tell Dot that you were on the right trail at last, which meant that you were not far from Claude Crecy, the Terror of the Road. That message—the one you wrote, I mean—will never reach its destination."

"Why not?"

"Because it fell into my hands."

Buckskin Frank uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Never mind that," continued Claude, impatiently. "You are ready to avenge Dot's

father's death! Good! And you are not particular about the weapons. Eagerness renders you the most accommodating foe I ever had. I choose bowies. Let us go to the battle-field. Where we fight, Frank Fargo, no man can boast of any advantage over the other."

As he finished, the road-agent turned and started off, watched and eagerly followed by the western man-hunter.

A short walk brought them to a shanty whose door stood wide open, and invited them into the most intense gloom.

"Our battle-ground, Buckskin," said Death Rattle, or Claude Crecy, as he pointed into the cabin with his glittering bowie.

The detective stepped over the threshold and saw the door shut.

"Here we are in gloom darker than Egypt's," said a voice whose owner could not be seen. "Catamount is likely to be surprised when he comes back. Are you ready?"

A strange feeling had taken possession of Buckskin Frank. He was about to fight the man he had hunted for months—the desperado whose pistol had taken the life of the father of the sweetest girl west of the Mississippi.

He recalled the vow he had registered two years before in her presence—that he would not see her again until at his hand the king of all road-agents had paid for the blood he had pitilessly shed. Since that time he had not heard from Dot, nor from Colonel Scott, her protector. She might have found a lover, married and forgotten him; she might not be in Salt Lake, but nearer the western ocean, or in the far East. The message which he had consigned to Colonel Scott that morning was the first sent during those two years of man-hunting, for until that time Claude Crecy had eluded him; never before had he found the trail so fresh.

Thoughts like these flashed through his mind in an instant, and in reply to the question from the gloom of Catamount Luke's shanty, he threw himself on the defensive, and eagerly exclaimed:

"I am ready!"

To his surprise no attack followed; instead, he heard these words:

"If you are going to lunge at me, stop a minute, Buckskin. Did you think that Colonel Scott would see Dot soon?"

"He ought to. She is in Salt Lake, or—"

A laugh was the interruption.

"That laugh means something," said the detective to himself. "Claude Crecy knows something about Dot that would be news to me."

"Well, if you think her in the capital of the Mormons, she must be there," the road-agent went on. "Do not let me disabuse your mind of that consoling thought, but let us fight!"

"Yes, let us try our bowies," flashed the detective, although he added to himself, "By Jove! I will force from you at my bowie's point the secret you seem to possess."

The darkness that prevailed in the shanty was the darkness of Egypt. A cricket chirping under a board was the only sound that broke the silence after the detective's last word.

Death Rattle's voice had proceeded from a spot directly in front of his eager foe, but it was not probable that he was still there. As this was to be a duel to the death, would he not shift his position to deceive the detective and thus get in a killing stroke?

Buckskin Frank moved suddenly to one side, for from that direction a sound not unlike a human footstep had been borne to his ears. He drew back the bowie for a blow, then stooped quickly, and the next moment a man's feet struck his body and Claude Crecy fell headlong over him!

The detective's ears had not deceived him. If he had not lowered his body when he did, the knife of his foe might have been buried in his breast.

An oath from the darkness where the discomfited duelist had alighted, gave the detective his enemy's position, and with a tigerish spring he threw himself forward.

"At last!" he hissed, as he alighted on a human body from which a hand tried in vain to tear him.

"Yes, at last!" was the grated response. "Let it now be a hunt for hearts, Buckskin Frank, and may the best man win the beauty of Gold Gulch Camp."

The detective could not repress a cry.

"I want her not, Claude Crecy. You are welcome to her smiles. I want revenge!"

"Ha! ha! If you knew who possesses the title I have just spoken you would not have spoken thus. That is my throat you're at, Buckskin!"

The answer was a mad chuckle, for the hand of the detective was at the throat of the man he held to the earth; but with all his strength at his disposal, Claude Crecy wrenched the choking hand away, and with four words which unnerved the detective, he threw him off and sprang erect.

Buckskin Frank staggered to his feet minus his bowie, for the road-agent's words were enough to have torn a dozen knives from his grip.

"Dot is my wife!"

The enemies stood five feet apart breathing like wearied wrestlers.

The detective felt that Claude Crecy still possessed his bowie, and instinctively and madly half-drew his revolver.

"You have lied!" he flashed. "For a base falsehood like the one you have uttered, Claude Crecy, you should die a thousand deaths. You slew Dot's father and you lie when you tell me that she is your wife."

A cutting laugh, full of a desperado's triumph, was the sole response.

"Laughing cannot drown a lie!" continued Buckskin. "I am going to fight as I please from this time out. Beware!"

The half-drawn revolver clicked as it leaped clear of the detective's belt, and the next second a sudden flash for a moment illumined the interior of the shanty.

The Man from Denver saw the glittering bowie drop from Claude Crecy's hand as he reeled away, and heard him fall upon the board beneath which the cricket had long since ceased to chirp.

"Avenged!" fell from Buckskin Frank's lips. "He maddened me with a lie, and lost his life by it. You his wife, Dot? You are in Salt Lake, where I left you two years ago, and he knew it. He coined that infamous lie to break my hold. He succeeded, but it afterward cost him his existence."

The victor was moving toward his enemy, when the door of the shanty was suddenly opened, and a loud voice called out:

"Hello, thar!"

The detective stopped, turned around, and then went toward the opening.

"Come on," said another voice, undoubtedly a young girl's. "Catamount Luke has fired his revolver in his sleep—that is all."

An instant later Buckskin Frank sprang from the shanty and halted before the couple, who were a man and a young girl—the latter dressed in a short hunting frock and wild Indian leggings.

"Great heavens, Dot!" cried the detective, as he recoiled from the tableau before him. "It cannot be that I meet you here. But I am satisfied. I have kept my vow. Dot! Dot! do you not know me?"

Astonishment filled the girl's eyes; she advanced, and stared into the detective's face.

"I do not know you, although you call me Dot," she said.

"I am Frank, the man who has just avenged your father's death."

"You?" in an incredulous tone. "You Frank Fargo? The Indians killed him on Eagle River a year ago. In proof of this I could show you his watch, which fell by accident into my hands."

The man-hunter's hand flew swiftly to his face, and the beard that covered it fell at his feet.

The girl and her companion started back with exclamations of surprise.

"Who am I now?"

"I do not know."

"Go into that cabin with a light and look at the man lying on its slabs; then come back and say that I am not the real Frank Fargo, the Avenger. But I had forgotten. You are Claude Crecy's wife."

A wild cry broke from the girl's lips.

"The wife of that man?" she exclaimed. "When did I become such? Now I know you are not Frank. Come, sir," to her companion. "Gold Gulch has gained new citizens since I left it."

"I will convince you as to my identity, Dot," the excited detective cried, starting after the girl. "You must—you shall hear me."

"Back, sir! Follow me if you dare!" and the lovely speaker turned with leveled revolver. "The man who brands Dainty Dot of Gold Gulch Camp with the crime of being Claude Crecy's wife can never prove himself her father's avenger. You will not follow me, sir. And I advise you to seek another climate as quickly as possible!"

These words from the beautiful girl whom he had left two years before in one of the most luxurious homes in Salt Lake!

It is no wonder that the dazed detective staggered back with a cry of despair.

"I'll prove my words one of these days," he said. "Dot—Dot—"

He paused abruptly, for nobody stood before him. The girl and her companion had vanished.

CHAPTER IV.

A THOUSAND OUNCES REWARD.

"What's thet ye war gettin' off, pard?" Buckskin Frank turned to confront a man whom he at once recognized as Whirlwind Tom, whom he had lately left at the Wheel of Fortune.

"Warn't that Dainty Dot an' one ov her pards?" continued the speaker, as his eyes glanced in the direction taken by the girl and her companion.

"The girl—the woman is Dot. You have been in Gold Gulch these many months, Whirlwind. Tell me all you know about her."

The detective's demeanor while he spoke caused a smile to become visible at the corners of his listener's mouth.

"She's got ye all in a flurry, Fancy. If I had some dust I'd plank it thet ye've see'd her afore to-night."

"My God, yes!" cried Buckskin Frank. "Story for story, Whirlwind. Is it a bargain? Yes? Drive ahead. Your story first."

Whirlwind Tom eyed his man strangely, and for several seconds before he spoke.

"You want all thet I know ov Dainty Dot's history since you saw her last. Isn't thet about it, Fancy?"

Tom still knew the detective as Holloway or Fancy Fred, the Man from Denver.

"Yes," was the answer. "I want all you know about her. I saw her last two years ago in Salt Lake."

"Two years ago?" echoed the lucky gambler. "About thet time she appeared in Gold Gulch, mounted on a Maverick thet hed more lightnin' in him than any hoss in the Gulch. She came in a storm an' we give her shelter. She war huntin' vengeance, for some chap hed killed her father."

"Who was the villain? Did she say?"

"Certainly; she made no bones about thet, Dainty Dot didn't. Why should she, pard? She hed bizness with Claude Crecy, the boss ov road-men; thet's the chap whose gore she wanted. She didn't git it, Fancy, although she went wherever she thought she would find Devil Claude. Once some Injuns found 'er in the mountains mighty nigh chawed up by a panther. The beast wor found lyin' beside her, all hacked to pieces, an' nobody would hev given much for her chances. We throwed in an' got a doctor from Denver, an' he brought her through all right. Tell yer, pard, thet bone-setter went home well heeled. Since thet time Dainty Dot hez been among us. She still keeps one eye open fur Claude, but hezn't had a good chance to drop 'im yet. Her time will come, though Fortune's goin' ter smile on Dot's stake one o' these times, and then you'll hear suthin' drap."

"That time will never come," said the detective, in a tone that dilated Whirlwind Tom's eyes with wonder.

"It ar' bound ter git hyar, I say," was the response.

Buckskin Frank smiled significantly as he turned toward the cabin in which the duel in the dark had been fought.

"You've seen this king of the mountain Duvals?" he said, over his shoulder.

"A dozen times, Fancy."

"You'd know him if you saw him?"

"Sartinly."

"Here's a match. Strike it, and go in and look at the man lying in the corner of Catamount Luke's shanty."

Whirlwind Tom took the matches which the detective thrust into his hand, and stepped toward the door.

"I don't know about this, Fancy," he said, reflectively, at the very threshold of the cabin. "But I'll go in an' look at yer man."

Down came the lucifer on the rough boards of Catamount's shanty, and as the match blazed up Whirlwind Tom stepped inside.

Impelled by curiosity, Buckskin Frank stepped forward and watched the burly figure following the little flicker of fire.

"Thar's nobody hyar, pard!" came from the cabin, in tones that drew a cry of horror from the man-hunter's lips.

No dead man in the corner? Impossible!

A moment later Buckskin Frank was in the cabin at Whirlwind's side. The gambler was pointing into a vacant corner while he stared into the detective's face.

Suddenly a wild cry pealed from Whirlwind Tom's throat, and the blazing match fell to the floor as he sprang up and rushed from the cabin.

He had at that moment noticed that the man he had been calling Fancy Fred had a smooth face, whereas the man whom he had lately played with at Rocky Rod's sported a full beard.

Buckskin Frank would have laughed at the desperado's fright if the burning match had not showed him a glittering spot on the rough shabs at his feet.

It was blood.

An instant later the match went out.

"Hold on thar, pard!" exclaimed a voice on the outside of the cabin. "Halt! er by Jehu I'll drap ye."

The detective leaped toward the door, to be half blinded by a sudden flash, and to see Whirlwind Tom still directing his smoking revolver at the object at which he had fired.

"Missed!" grated the gambler, in a voice of bitter disappointment.

"Who did you shoot at, Whirlwind?"

"By Jehu! you're in pardnership with Old Nick!" was the response, and the speaker recoiled from the detective as if he had risen from a grave. "I give in, cl'ar in, pard. You must be half a dozen men in one. I've jes' fired at one ov yer shapes, fur, 'pon my soul! it ran out o' the shanty."

The gambler's ridiculous mistake made Buckskin Frank smile. All was clear to him. The man at whom Whirlwind Tom had just fired was Claude Crecy, the road-agent. Instead of lying dead in one corner of Catamount's cabin, he was able to make good his retreat from Whirlwind's revolver.

"I was mistaken," said the detective. "Dot's enemy still lives. I thought I had killed him, but he has escaped. You shot at Claude Crecy?"

"No!"

"At no one else?"

In a few words Buckskin narrated the duel in the shanty. He found the gambler an attentive listener.

"Now let me ask a question," said Whirlwind.

"I am at your service."

"You aren't Fancy Fred?"

The detective's eyes twinkled a negative.

"I kin guess who ye ar'. They call you Buckskin Frank at some places. Thar's a thousand ounces ov dust reward for ye."

"Who offers it?" asked the detective.

"Devil Claude."

Buckskin smiled.

"Death Rattle told us about it last night. A thousand ounces ov dust fur ye dead er alive, pard! Jes' think ov it. What ef ther stake losers at ther Wheel ov Fortune knowed ye war hyar?"

There seemed to be a triumphant accent in Whirlwind Tom's tone; his eyes were glittering with a miser's greed.

"Claude wants me badly," the detective said. "Death Rattle told you about the reward, eh? Did Dainty Dot never see that man?"

"Many a time."

"And never dreamed that he was her foe, Claude Crecy?"

"None o' thet, pard. Death Rattle are Death Rattle, an' no one else."

"Have it so, then."

"I war talkin' about Claude's big reward for Buckskin Frank. Look, hyar. How does this strike yer?" and before he could anticipate Whirlwind Tom's designs, the Western detective was looking into a cocked "navy."

In the flash of an eye the gambler's weapon had covered him.

"I might ez well rake in Claude's dust ez anybody," came over the leveled weapon from lips that had a devilish grin. "I kin finish Dot's history on our way to the place whar ye'r ter be delivered ter Claude. What brought ye hyar ez Fancy Fred from Denver, Buckskin? Ye hev'n't fifteen hundred ounces at yer command, I imagine?"

"I have what is of more value just now than all the dust in Gold Gulch Camp!" responded Buckskin, firmly; "and it is this!"

As he emphasized his last word, his left hand knocked Whirlwind's pistol arm aside, and his own revolver forced its muzzle against the desperado's temple.

"A word, a movement, and somebody will slip on your brains before morning!" he hissed, as his eyes flashed fire. "A thousand ounces of gold-dust is a tempting reward; it always catches such fellows as you. I hold the winning card just now. Pistols are trumps more chan half the time in Gold Gulch Camp, and I'm

closing in on your last stake, Whirlwind, which is your life. I'm going to kill you. I've got to do it!"

The last two sentences were spoken in cold, heartless tones.

The eyes of the threatened man glared at the victor like the sullen hyena's. He read no mercy in the detective's face.

"It's yer chance, I admit that," he said, addressing Buckskin. "I guess I'm the only man in camp 'ceptin' Devil Claude, ef he hesn't left it, what knows thet Fancy Fred is Buckskin Frank, for whose head one thousand ounces ov dust hev been offered."

"And that is just why I'm obliged to kill you, Whirlwind."

"Ov course. It ar' a desprit game ye'r playin', Buckskin; ye'r takin' risky chances."

There was no audible reply; but dim as the starlight was, Whirlwind Tom could see that his enemy had not relented.

"Put an end to this matter!" suddenly exclaimed the gambler, with impatience. "Ef somebody's ter slip on my brains, the sooner the better, mebbe."

"What do you mean?"

"Shoot an' see, Buckskin!"

"By heavens, I will!"

Following fast upon the stern detective's last word came a horrible, half-smothered report of a revolver, and a man reeled away and fell in a heap ten yards from the spot.

"I came to this part of the country to win!" fell from Buckskin Frank's lips as he threw a look at the motionless form of his victim. "The villain would have sold me to Claude Crecy for the thousand ounces of dust."

He stooped and picked up the beard-mask which had fallen from his face almost on that very spot while Dainty Dot confronted him.

In another moment he was Fancy Fred again and was walking rapidly toward the Wheel of Fortune.

What if the road-agent had returned to the den, and, as Death Rattle, prepared its inmates for his coming?

Buckskin Frank did not seem to have propounded this question to himself, for he crossed the threshold without a tremor and advanced toward a man who suddenly caught his eye.

"Where is Dainty Dot?" he asked this individual.

"I don't know, sir, but I was waitin' fur you. She sent this."

At the same time a piece of paper changed hands.

A moment later a loud voice rung through the room:

"Watch the door, men ov Gold Gulch! Thar's a man among us fur whose karkiss, dead er alive, thar's a thousand ounces ov dust reward!"

The detective did not move.

CHAPTER V.

TWO LETTERS IN EIGHT WORDS.

THE man who had handed the detective the message from Dainty Dot looked into his face with a glance that said:

"I understand. You are the man for whom the big reward is offered."

This person was none other than old Zack Dragon, the driver of the mail stage between Denver and Salt Lake City. The reader will recall the events of our first chapter.

Zack's escape from death was a remarkable one. As Claude Crecy informed Buckskin Frank, the driver had saved himself by catching hold of some cliff shrubbery to which he had clung until rescued by a party of Indians. The old driver had drifted naturally into Gold Gulch Camp. The place was a sort of maelstrom into which all who passed through the district were sure to be drawn.

He had met Dainty Dot already, and it was through him that her message, whatever it was, had reached the detective.

The order to guard the door of the Wheel of Fortune had been heard by every occupant of the place.

Buckskin Frank still held the girl's message in his hand; it had not been read, and he was entirely ignorant of its contents.

"Show us ther chap, 'Rappahoe,'" cried a number of voices.

The man thus addressed was the person who had ordered the door to be guarded.

"Yonder he stands, boys!" and the speaker's outstretched hand designated the detective.

"Thet fellar ain't Fancy Fred, but he is Buckskin Frank, ther mountain man-hunter. Devil Claude means him on his notices, an' nobody else."

By this time every eye was fastened upon the

detective. Zack Dragon glided toward him, and said in a voice that scarcely parted his lips:

"I guess you kin count on Zack Dragon, pard."

Buckskin Frank heard these words, but gave no sign.

Twenty men were glaring at him like tigers, and more than that number of hands clutched the butts of revolvers.

"What d'yer say, Fancy?" asked one of the ruffians. "Rappahoe makes a direct charge. Ef yer ar' Buckskin Frank, we want yer."

"I am Buckskin Frank!" came the answer, in clear, ringing tones, and the eyes of the speaker seemed to flash. "I may not be worth a thousand ounces of dust to Claude Crecy, but tell me where he wants to see me and I will meet him there."

The men of Gold Gulch exchanged significant glances.

"That won't do," cried one. "We intend to take ye to ther place."

"To-night?"

"Right away."

The detective sent a quick glance toward Zack Dragon.

"Sail in, pard," was the scarcely audible response.

The next instant two immense revolvers leaped into the light before Buckskin Frank, and the crowd involuntarily recoiled, as he took a step toward the door.

"I will seek Claude Crecy when I want to see him!" dropped from his lips. "Men of Gold Gulch, you will let me out."

A path was not cleared; the gamblers seemed to have recognized and were disposed to fight the cool man, whose revolvers were looking into their faces.

"Let 'im out!" said the old driver, who held in his right hand the revolver he had carried many times over the route.

"A pard, eh?" was the derisive response.

"By Jehu! we're goin' to hev a picnic hyar."

"But it will be a picnic of death, unless we are let out," came over the detective's revolvers.

"Claude Crecy was in the camp to-night and you know it. He is welcome here, for wolves love their kind."

"Hear 'im, pards! He calls us wolves. Will yer stand it?"

"No!"

Buckskin Frank smiled, and at the same time he took another step forward.

Again the men fell back before the leveled revolvers, but he was not to be allowed to gain the door without an accident.

"Trip 'im!" was suddenly whispered at the detective's elbow.

Instantly the menaced man shot a glance at the speaker, and the next second a foot was thrown violently against his legs, and he was almost thrown off his feet.

"Thet's it! Now corral ther tiger!"

"A rush was made for the detective; the entire occupancy of the den sprang like tigers at his throat.

Old Zack threw himself into the melee with a yell, but before he could cover a single assailant, he was flung aside and trampled under foot. All this within the space of a minute.

As for the detective, the search for the man on his left had resulted disastrously for him. His eye had been taken for a moment from the men in his front, and in the flash of an eye the attack was made.

Descending revolvers beat down his arms, and he was hurled back with ten men clutching at his throat. But all at once by a desperate wrench he jerked himself loose, and regained his feet.

"Don't let 'im lift his Navys!" cried 'Rappahoe who was pushed back as the detective rose. "He'll open ther pic-nic in earnest ef he does thet."

But Buckskin Frank did not use his revolvers, although he was on his feet again. He glanced at the speaker with a smile and then looked calmly into the score of revolvers that covered his face.

"Open ther pic-nic," said one of his confronters. "Jes' tech ther trigger and get in reer ther compliments ov Gold Gulch Camp. We will hold yer for Devil Claude, but he shan't hev yer until them thousand ounces ov dust hev been planked down."

"I agree to that," smiled the detective.

"Good! Men ov Gold Gulch, take down yer weepins."

The revolvers were lowered from before the detective's face, but their owners did not restore them to their belts.

In a minute not one was to be seen and Buck-

skin Frank stood apparently unmenaced in the midst of the men who a moment before had leaped at his throat.

"Ef ye hed agreed to that afore, thar would hev been no pic-nic like ther one we've jes' hed, Buckskin," said Rappahoe. "Claude hez got ther dust, but we must hev it afore he gits you. We'll hold ye in ther camp till we kin send 'im word. What brought yer back hyar to-night?"

"I came on business," replied the man-hunter.

"Not knowin' thet Death Rattle hed jis' told me thet you war in Gold Gulch? Ov course I hed you nailed jes' ez soon as you came into ther Wheel ov Fortune. Come up; ther boys are goin' ter drink."

The whole crowd was pushing forward toward the bar; but Buckskin Frank did not move.

At that moment there had appeared in the doorway a figure that kept his gaze.

"Hello! Dandy Red!" exclaimed several voices as the person in the door became visible to many. "Jes' in time for a little throat-scorchin', Dandy. Waltz up this way."

The person addressed, a full-blooded Indian, rather gaudily attired, advanced into the room; but with his eyes fastened on the detective.

"He's one ov the red-skins thet saved me with the lasso," whispered Zack, the driver.

Buckskin could not remove his gaze from the Indian. In years the red-skin was young, in stature tall, and physically an athlete.

"Who thet?" asked the Indian, wheeling suddenly upon Rappahoe as he designated the detective with outstretched finger.

"One ov us," replied the desperado with a wink at the detective. "Pard, this is Dandy Red, the boss Indian ov Colorado."

The young red held out his hand and the detective grasped it without hesitation. The next moment something slid along his palm and almost made him start; but when he withdrew his hand from the Indian's, he clutched a small piece of paper.

"Dandy never see white man before," said the Indian. "Him no been hyar long."

"No, came to-night."

"Dandy thought so. Where him come from?"

"Oh, come up an' take yer poison," cried a dozen impatient men at the rough counter.

"Hyar Dandy, what 'll yer take?"

The Indian turned to the counter with a parting glance at the detective who was burning with impatience to read the two messages which had been slyly conveyed to him, the one by Zack Dragon, the other by an Indian whom he now met for the first time.

"You'll give as yer parole?" asked Rappahoe as he turned to Buckskin with the moisture of Rocky Rod's villainous liquor on his lips. "It will only last till we kin hear from Claude."

"Certainly," was the reply. "I am not going to be stubborn now."

"Whar's Catamount?"

"Hyar!" said the owner of that name stepping forward.

"You fetch Buckskin to the Wheel to-night. Kin yer give 'im a part ov yer shanty?"

Catamount Luke responded in the affirmative, and without more ado the detective was turned over to him.

In Catamount's cabin he had fought Claude Crecy, and in front of it his revolver had finished Whirlwind Tom's career.

He pictured to himself the dead desperado lying in the starlight where he had fallen. Would not the crime be charged to him by the men of Gold Gulch when the body was found?

Catamount Luke led his guest straight to his shanty, and the detective's eyes searched the space in front of it for the dead; but no human body met his gaze!

"Remember yer parole, Buckskin," said Catamount as he waved his guest into the structure. "I'm goin' back to ther Wheel." And off he went.

"I'll know something now," said Buckskin Frank to himself as he produced a lucifer. "I've got two letters to read. Heaven knows I've been anxious to get at them these many minutes."

The match immediately blazed up, and he drew Dainty Dot's message forth and in an instant mastered its four words:

"Whirlwind is buried. Go!"

The detective did not speak as he read the line, nor when he tore the message up, but there was a hopeful gleam in his eyes.

Then came the paper received from Dandy Red, the red-skin. A second match had to be burned for it.

Its contents consisted of three words:

"Remember the Alamosa!"

"What does it mean!" exclaimed Buckskin not a little mystified, and at that moment his match went out. "Whoever sent that message, might as well have written it in Hebrew. 'Remember the Alamosa.' What does it mean?"

His mind was busy for five minutes; he was thinking over the past.

"I know of but one Alamosa and that is on the old Fort Garland Trail," he said to himself. "I was there once four years ago. What happened then? Nothing! Nothing? Ah, yes; I saved an Indian dog from a lot of miners who were going to hang him to a tree for amusement. But Dandy Red's message can't refer to that incident. It must mean something else."

"I expect it does."

These words came from the door, and with his revolver in his right hand the detective sprung forward.

He saw nobody when he reached the threshold, heard nothing; yet some one had spoken.

He went back into the cabin, but a moment later heard another voice at the door.

"Shake that young Indian if you want to win the game you're playing in Gold Gulch!" were the words he heard this time.

CHAPTER VI.

BREAKING A PAROLE.

WHILE there was no signature to the first letter he had read, the detective knew that it had come from Dot. The man whom he had slain to keep his identity from the denizens of Gold Gulch Camp had been buried; but he had been unmasked for all that.

Claude Crecy had returned to the Wheel of Fortune in the role of Death Rattle, the gambler, and through a revelation by him, Rappahoe had been able to accuse the detective, and bring about the events which have just taken place.

Buckskin Frank had ample time to think over these things in the gloom and silence of Catamount Luke's cabin.

He had found the young girl for whom he had trod the path of vengeance for two years. Instead of being in Salt Lake City, where he had left her, she was a tenant of Gold Gulch, among a lot of lawless men who feared neither lead nor steel.

Like himself, she was hunting Claude Crecy, who had shot her father because he refused to submit to being robbed on an overland trail. She had lived in the very district inhabited by the mountain road-agent, had probably met Death Rattle in Gold Gulch a thousand times, and yet no one had told her that the gambler was the man she wanted.

To all she was Dainty Dot; none ever asked about her real name, for not one among the camp's tenants cared to know.

"I am not going to remain here," exclaimed the detective. "Dot is in Gold Gulch, and I am going to make her recognize me. I must see her to thank her for having Whirlwind Tom buried, if for nothing else. Then I want to know the meaning of Dandy Red's three letter message. I think I have my hands full."

Once more Buckskin Frank stood in the starlight that revealed to his gaze the wooden shanties of the camp. He saw no one; the person who had just warned him to beware of Dandy Red had disappeared, and when he started off he heard no footsteps behind him.

He stopped in the middle of the street before Rocky Rod's den and looked in at the open door. The usual business was progressing as if nothing unusual had happened that night; the tables were well filled, and the detective recognized the features of "Mr." Starbox, Whirlwind Tom's late partner.

But his gaze wandered through the room in search of a person whom he about half expected to find there—Dot. She was not to be seen, however, and after a five minute inspection of the lighted interior of the Wheel, he passed on.

This time there was a tread in his rear.

The detective heard it distinctly, and his practiced ear told him that it was not the tread of a miner in his heavy boots, but rather the cat-like step of an Indian.

Dandy Red was the only red-skin he had seen in Gold Gulch Camp since his arrival, but others were likely to inhabit it. Indians were privileged characters there; they were admitted to the tables, and the proceeds of many a long hunt had vanished in the excitement of play.

"The dog, whoever he is, is following me," muttered Buckskin, quietly removing his revolver from his belt. "I am not going to be fooled with if I am on my parole of honor. I may have to treat this enemy like I treated Whirlwind Tom."

He kept on, but with his eye on the trail be-

hind him. As yet the person there had not come in sight. All at once, springing clear of the ground, the detective gained the dark corner of one of the cabins and held his breath.

The footsteps stopped for a moment, then came on again.

A moment later he saw a figure stoop in the road at the point where he had left it.

All doubts that he was tracked now vanished, for the feathers of an Indian were visible.

Buckskin put up his revolver, and drew his bowie in its place.

"This makes no noise," he said to himself, as his hand closed tightly about the handle of the knife. "I am tracked for some purpose by an Indian. Claude Crecy may not be in the camp, but I am convinced that he is not idle. I must not forget that he has offered a thousand ounces of dust reward for me!"

Did the Indian in the road suddenly discover that the detective had left it at that point?

He rose with a light cry, and turned toward the cabin where Buckskin stood in readiness for him.

"White man leave road, but Dandy Red will find him; him must!"

"It is Dandy Red, the red-skin I am to shake!" murmured the man-hunter, recalling the words of the mysterious voice which had spoken at the door of Catamount's cabin.

The Indian was approaching while he spoke, and all at once the detective darted from the shadows straight at his tracker's throat.

"One cry, one word, Dandy Red, and my bowie will split your heart!" he hissed, as his fingers closed on the copper-colored tracker. "You hunt me. I am here. I have forgotten the Alamosa. Will you be so good as to explain?"

The Indian's reply was a stare; his eyes seemed ready to leap from their sockets; the detective's grip was too tight.

"There!" the latter said, letting up a little.

"I do not desire to shut off your wind entirely, although you have played the sneaking wolf to-night. You can talk now. I am sure of it."

"Dandy Red kin talk, but his neck feel sore," was the reply. "Buckskin need not fear Dandy's knife, even if him let Injun go entirely. Him forget Alamosa, eh? Dandy never forget it."

"Who wrote the three words you put into my hand awhile ago?"

"Dandy Red."

"You?"

"Dandy kin put white man's talk on paper. Him learned it since him see Buckskin last."

The detective showed the young red-skin a puzzled countenance.

"If I have met you before to-night, I have forgotten the circumstance," he said.

"White man often forgets. A young Injun went to Alamosa once after a long hunt; his dog went along. The town was full of white men who had been drinking fire-water. They catch Injun's dog, and was going to hang him. The young Injun tried to save his dog, for he was a good hunter; he offered his gun and blanket for the dog's life, but the pale-faces would not listen, and when the Injun try to take his dog away they knock him down and kick him. But Buckskin came up then and cut the dog down just when the fire-watered whites were hanging him. Now, does Buckskin remember the Alamosa?"

"To be sure I do!" responded the detective, to whom the incident connected with his only visit to Alamosa now vividly returned. "You are the owner of that dog?"

"Dog b'long to Dandy Red!" was the reply.

"Him swear then that him would never forget Buckskin. They are friends. Dandy Red was ready to shoot for Buckskin when him found his friend in the hands of his white foes."

There was honesty in the young Indian's voice, and frankness beamed from his eyes. Yet, he had been mysteriously warned not to trust him.

"Buckskin suspicious, eh?" continued Dandy Red. "All right! Injun go away, but before long him will show white man that him no lie now. Rappahoe has sent a messenger to say to Mountain Claude that they have caught Buckskin. To-morrow he will be taken to Claude's cabin."

The Indian turned away as he finished, and would have stepped beyond the detective's reach if the hand of the latter had not detained him.

"Where is Claude's cabin? Do you know, Dandy?" he asked eagerly.

The Indian nodded, but quickly added:

"Buckskin's word is out that he will stay here."

"That is true, but—"

"No, no! send Dandy Red to Mountain Claude," interrupted the red-skin. "Let him prove to Buckskin that him no furegt Alamosa."

"I will go myself."

"And break word?"

"No! I will throw up the parole. You have but to say that you will put me on the trail to Claude Crecy's cabin. I fought the villain to-night, but it was in the dark, and I am not surprised at my failure."

"How Buckskin throw up parole?" asked the puzzled Indian.

"Oh, that will not be difficult. Come with me. I was on my way to find Dot; but I am willing to let her go for the present."

As he finished, Buckskin Frank turned toward the Wheel of Fortune, and walked rapidly away, followed by the Indian, who seemed to consider him as one who had lost his wits.

Although it was late, Rocky Rod had not shut up his trap for the night, and the detective soon saw that the same crowds lingered at the tables.

He was advancing upon the establishment with a cocked revolver in his right hand, when Dandy Red clutched his arm.

"Buckskin has lost his head!" he said. "What him going to do?"

"Throw off my parole—that's all," was the reply. "Stand by me until you have showed me Claude Crecy's trail, and you'll never regret it. You have already paid the debt contracted at Alamosa."

As he finished he shook off the Indian's gripe, and stepped boldly to the open door.

With the courage of a brave man he sprang lightly upon the threshold, and faced the hard crowd that filled the room.

"Men of Gold Gulch, give me your attention for a minute!"

Every head was raised and every eye became riveted upon him.

"I repudiate the parole given here an hour ago," he went on, in the tones of a determined man. "I have business beyond the boundaries of Gold Gulch Camp, and I give you back the parole forced upon me at the pistol's muzzle."

There were oaths and half-suppressed threats, and hands moved toward the ready weapons of the far West.

"By George! you break your word at your peril!" cried Rappahoe, springing from behind his table. "We don't want your parole back."

"I leave it here at any rate."

"Then we'll give you over to the man what wants you—dead!"

A strange smile, more than half defiant, stole to the corners of Buckskin Frank's mouth.

"If it comes to that, men of Gold Gulch, you will find me ready!" he said. "I will be bound no longer. You may follow me, but my revolver may speak in tones that have no uncertain sound!"

He stepped from the den with his last words on his lips.

"I am ready now," he said calmly to the waiting Indian. "You are to show me Claude Crecy's retreat."

"Quick, Buckskin!" And the red-skin's hand clutched his arm again.

"Rappahoe and his white braves are on your trail."

The detective was hurried around the corner of the den by the young Indian, and that more than half against his will. His blood was hot; he was ready to stay and fight it out with the desperadoes of Gold Gulch Camp; but the thought of Claude Crecy kept him at Dandy Red's side.

Led by Rappahoe, the tenants of the Wheel of Fortune rushed forth to find no one in sight, and to stop in the lighted road like suddenly-baffled sleuth-hounds.

"He's somewhar in camp!" exclaimed the leader of the crowd. "We might hev knowed that he would throw ther parole into our faces afore mornin'! Scatter an' hunt 'im down! No foolishness this time! Claude's offer says 'dead er erlive,' an' ov course he'd prefer Buckskin erlive, but we mustn't take any risks. Shoot him on sight, an' then we won't hev ter ask fur his parole."

In another moment a fierce hunt for the detective would have commenced if a girlish figure had not appeared to the crowd, and spoken in tones heard by all:

"Let that man go!" she said. "His mission is one which I approve of, his trail is my trail; and the man who touches him, I will kill if I can!"

The men of Gold Gulch stared into the beautiful face and the flashing eyes of the speaker.

She had planted her figure firmly before Rappahoe, but her words were addressed to the whole crowd.

"Look hyar, Dainty Dot," said Rappahoe, the first to recover. "Thar's a thousand ounces ov dust on thet man."

"If there were a million I would not retract one of my words!" was the reply. "I will say no more than this. Touch him and I may shoot!"

Dainty Dot's lips met with firmness behind the last words, after uttering which she turned and walked away.

Rappahoe's mad eyes followed her for a moment, then he turned to the crowd at his back.

"I didn't expect sich a play ez this from Dainty," he said. "Boys, she holds the call on us now. What's got inter ther gal?"

"She's struck with Buckskin!" came from the crowd, and those who looked toward the speaker saw "Mr." Starbox's lips moving. "Take yer choice between the thousand ounces of dust an' ther gal. If she's goin' ter rule ther camp, I want ter pull up stakes an' vamose."

A shout of defiance was the response, and Rappahoe said firmly as his eyes met the last speaker's gaze:

"We kin git along without the gal; but we must hev the dust!"

A few feet away Dainty Dot heard this decision, and smiled when she knew its terrible import.

CHAPTER VII.

CLAUDE AND THE CONGRESSMEN.

"Wal, what luck, cap'n?"

"I'm back alive; that's about all, Poison."

"Then he's down thar?"

"Yes."

The first speaker who stood in front of a cabin built near the wildest part of the old Denver and Salt Lake Trail looked at the man who had approached from toward Gold Gulch Camp, and did not further question him after his last brief reply.

"I met him as Death Rattle, but parted from him in my true character," continued the last speaker. "We had a tussle—a fight in the dark with bowies, Poison."

"And you left him thar?"

"I didn't bring him with me, that's certain," was the rather snappish answer. "Let me go on. He's no body's slouch. I found him at the Wheel of Fortune. All who go to the camp get there some time or other. After he left the place, I got up and followed, but he was ready for me. He had penetrated my disguise—done in one second what fifty men in the Gulch hev'n't succeeded in doing in three years. Well, we had to fight, as I told you. We went to Catamount's shanty—I led him there—shut the door, and we went at it. When I thought I had him I sprung at him, but he must have the eyes of an owl, for I went clear over him."

Poison Jack, the bandit's single auditor uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"He was upon me before I could rise, and after fighting awhile we separated; but he let me have it with his revolver just as I was about to settle the whole affair forever with one of mine."

"Shot you, cap'n?"

"I fell, anyhow," was the reply. "The bullet fired in the dark came near putting an end to me. My blood is on the planks of Catamount's cabin, and plenty of it, too. When I recovered, I heard voices and groped my way to the door and rushed out. Whirlwind Tom was there, but his 'halt' didn't stop me, so he fired and the bullet went between my arm and my heart."

"Two close calls, Cap'n Claude," said the listener. "An' you came straight to ther cabin?"

"Not exactly. I saw Rappahoe first and posted him. Buckskin will be the captive of the camp before morning. The thousand ounces reward will stimulate Rappahoe."

"Ov course it will, but whar is ther dust to come from?"

Claude Crecy smiled.

"I want Buckskin Frank above all things," he said. "Never mind the dust, Poison. A beggar's reward is as good as a king's, if neither intend to pay."

"Thet's a fact. But Dainty Dot? I wonder ef Buckskin saw her?"

"I think not. I hope not," said the bandit, quickly. "I didn't see her to-night, myself; but Death Rattle knows what he's doing. Faint heart never won fair lady, Jack," and

the Terror of the Stage Trail laughed as his hand descended upon Poison Jack's shoulder.

The cabin was Claude Crecy's home. He had other hiding-places among the mountains, of course; but here he and Jack had established a home from which the king of road-agents had crept to deeds that had terrorized a large scope of country. The lonely cabin was so well secluded, that a stranger would not have been made aware of its existence until he found himself face to face with it.

"We'll live some day in a better palace than this, Jack," Claude exclaimed as he waved his hand toward the mountain retreat which the stars could scarcely see, so well was it hidden on the mountain side.

"Then ye'r goin' to give up the road business?"

"Before long!"

"When Death Rattle wins Dainty Dot?"

Claude's reply was an affirmative smile.

"She doesn't dream the truth; an' she's huntin' Devil Claude with a revolver, tool Cap'n, what if the true facts should flash across the gal's mind?"

The stage robber was silent and sober for a moment.

"I guess I'm equal to any occasion," he replied a moment later with a light laugh. "I will not be Death Rattle after the wooing—nor Claude Crecy. I can be some one else in Denver, with my beautiful bride, and you, Jack—you will soon learn to call me by my new name."

"I'd rather stay hyar fur fear I'd make a blunder, an' let the cat out ov the bag."

The twain had passed into the interior of the cabin which was partly illuminated by the rays of a lamp.

Although Claude Crecy had deprived the mail stages of many precious sacks, not one was to be seen in the retreat on the mountain side, neither were any of the proceeds of his numerous robberies visible.

The apartment was simply furnished; a cot, a rough table, and several three-legged stools.

"I get disgusted whenever I have to play the role of Death Rattle," he said, throwing his disguise upon the floor.

"But I can't be Claude Crecy to everybody here. It wouldn't do, Jack."

"Ov course not, cap'n. Policy ar' policy, an' a man's no man at all what hezn't thet precious article."

The road-agent stood silent in the dim lamp-light for a moment, when Poison Jack sprang up with the agility of a suddenly startled cat and went to the door.

"Suthin' 's comin' from toward Mormondom," he said over his shoulder in a low tone while he continued to listen at the entrance. "Mebbe it's that Congressional Committee. Ef so, cap'n, they've got an escort ov cavalry an' ar' too much fur both ov us ter tackle."

A sneer curled Claude Crecy's lips at Jack's mention of a Congressional Committee, and the next second he stood beside his companion.

"It is the committee, sure enough!" he said.

"I hear nothing but a stage. Do you know, Jack, that those fellows just to show their contempt for me wouldn't be escorted by Government Cavalry for half of their pay? I let them pass over the trail unstopped going out, just to interview them on their way back."

"Ye'r goin' down, then?"

"I am. Stay here."

As the Rocky Mountain road-agent left the cabin, he drew from his belt and examined two elegant, silver-mounted revolvers, into which more than two hundred frightened travelers had stared. He had discarded the mask which made him Death Rattle, and was the handsome, dark-eyed Claude Crecy, knight of the mountain trail once more.

The stage road wound round the mountain many feet below the bandits' retreat; but, used to the descent, he soon stood on it at a spot well calculated for a surprise.

The rumble of the approaching vehicle was distinctly heard. Claude knew that it was drawn by four horses, over whose heads one of the best overland drivers in the country cracked his whip.

The bandit selected his spot, and leaning against the great bare rock that made a wall on one side of the road, he waited quietly for his prey. Suddenly an outburst of coarse laughter soared above the rumble of the stage.

"The Washington birds are merry!" fell from the road-agent's lips, and the next moment further sounds told him that a portion of the committee was in a hilarious condition, for a refrain like this, boisterously sung, floated afar over valley and peak:

"We're going back to Washington—
To Washington! to Washington!
We're on our road to Washington,
To hand in our report.
We've crossed the Rockies, and we find
The people cultivated, kind,
And Devil Claude a myth!"

"A myth! We'll see about that in a moment or two," smiled the road-agent, as he stepped into the road just as the foremost horses turned a bend and brought the happy party in plain view.

"Halt!" rung out loud and clear on the night air.

The man in the driver's box pulled the team back, and Claude stepped to one side, with both revolvers leveled at the stage.

Instantly half a dozen heads were protruded from the windows, and several angry voices demanded to know why the vehicle did not proceed.

"I am the cause of this stoppage, gentlemen," said Claude, in a clear tone, which drew the attention of all to him. "If you have not signed your report, permit my presence here to correct some false impressions. I would not have Congress misinformed on any subject, especially in regard to myself—not for the world, gentlemen! I am Claude Crecy, the myth, and I beg of you to toss this way your watches, as reminders of your official trip to this region."

The mock gravity of the bandit's tone cannot be described.

A majority of the heads instantly disappeared in the interior of the stage; those that remained at the windows belonged to persons whose presence of mind seemed entirely gone.

"The chronometers, gentlemen!" said Claude, impatiently.

"This is an outrage, sir!" suddenly cried a florid-faced man whose head almost filled the window at which it appeared. "We are members of the United States Congress."

"Your title to that distinction is not disputed," rejoined Claude. "I am simply a Rocky Mountain gentleman, who—"

"Gentleman!—robber!" was the irate interruption. "You shall hear from us when we get to Washington. No! by George! we will open the campaign when we strike Denver. You lay your bandit hands on the sovereign power of the whole Government when you stop us!"

"And you will lay your bones in a Rocky Mountain graveyard if you don't toss me your watches within two minutes!"

There was a sternness in Claude's tones which was not to be mistaken.

"Drive on, driver!" cried a voice from the gloomy interior of the stage.

Claude sent a glance upward at the man on the driver's seat. He occupied his box like Patience on a monument.

"Come, gentlemen, the watches, or I shall send twelve compliments among you in the shape of bullets."

"Don't shoot, my dear sir, and we will comply with your request," was the frightened reply.

A few seconds later seven gold watches fell at Claude Crecy's feet.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"All, sir."

"Driver, how many passengers have you?"

"Seven."

"Now, gentlemen, you can open the campaign at Denver, or proceed on to Washington and draw up your report. The best wishes of Claude Crecy accompany you. Move on, driver."

The Jehu gathered up the lines again and cracked his whip.

Claude stepped nearer the edge of the road, but kept his revolvers leveled on the stage.

"Look here, sir," cried the big man, shaking his fist out of the window, "you're no gentleman! My first care when I get to Washington will be to draw up a bill that will hang, draw and quarter you like England served Wallace, the Scottish rebel. We are going to put an end to your brigandage if it costs us every soldier in the regular service and every dollar in the Treasury."

"You will probably vote yourselves new watches first. Good-by, gentlemen; we may meet again."

The stage moved on, and the fat Congressman began a new tirade of epithets and threats, which he kept up until Claude could no longer hear his voice.

He therefore fell to examining the elegant prizes he had secured. They were heavy gold chronometers—one, which boasted of a shell case, being remarkably beautiful.

Claude opened it mechanically, and found a photograph attached to the inside of the case.

"A Congressman's sweetheart," he said to himself. "I must see how she looks."

He lit a match, and held it near the picture. As the light leaped up, he uttered a loud cry and started back.

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed. "I did not expect to see Julia's face here. The owner of this watch shall have his property again, if I have to take it to Washington in person."

A minute later Claude Crecy was on his way back to the retreat on the mountain side.

"Jack! Jack! where are you?" asked the road-agent as he entered the cabin ungreeted by his comrade.

A groan at his feet made him spring forward. "I'm hyar, cap'n, playin' my last hand with death!" was the feeble response as Claude stooped.

"Jack, it is you! what is the matter?"

"Knifed! I wouldn't tell 'em whar you war, fur they wouldn't tell me the'r bizness."

"Who were they, Jack?"

Claude held his breath while the dying man gathered strength to reply.

"Two men from Gold Gulch Camp," came the reply at last. "Pay the hull crowd back fur it, cap'n!"

"I'll do it, Jack!"

CHAPTER VIII.

CLAUDE'S VENGEANCE.

POISON JACK, Claude Crecy's trustiest friend, had remained true to him to the last.

While he spoke the words "I'll do it, Jack!" the road-agent held his pard's hand in his. When the two hands separated, Poison Jack was dead, and Claude was the only living tenant of the cabin.

In a few words the dead man had told how he came by his mortal wound.

"I wouldn't tell them whar you war, cap'n, and they wouldn't tell me their bizness."

He referred to the visit to the cabin made by the "two men from Gold Gulch Camp."

These men were the messengers sent by 'Rappahoe to inform Claude that Buckskin Frank had been captured, and was then the prisoner of the camp. 'Rappahoe was one of the few men who knew the location of Claude's mountain retreat, and to the two messengers he imparted the route.

Jack, of course, was the only person found in the cabin, and, as the messengers refused to detail their errand to him, he as stubbornly refused to disclose Claude's whereabouts.

Hot words, then blows followed, and the two messengers from Gold Gulch Camp left the cabin, and Poison Jack weltering in his blood.

This is, in brief, the story of the bandit's death, for bandit Jack was, as more than one wild mountain deed could attest.

Claude Crecy stood for a while in silence over the body of his companion.

"Two men from Gold Gulch, eh?" he said, repeating Jack's last words. "I'll go down and see about it."

He did not know that Buckskin Frank and Dandy Red, the Indian, were at that moment approaching the retreat in which he stood. If he had, he might have remained at home and given them a warm reception.

He went down the mountain by a circuitous route to Gold Gulch, and his boots awoke the echoes of the camp in the early hours of the morning.

Vengeance for the death of Poison Jack was what he wanted now.

It was an "all-night session" for some of the frequenters of the Wheel of Fortune; the door of the establishment still stood wide, but all the tables were not occupied.

Claude Crecy strode straight to the door, and stalked boldly into the room.

He was not Death Rattle now; the mask which he had discarded still lay on the planks of the mountain cabin behind the stiffened body of his comrade.

"Hello! a stranger!"

At these words, heard all over the gambling den, the gamblers looked up.

"By Jove! it's Claude himself!" ejaculated the redoubtable "Mr." Starbox, as he rose to greet the early visitor. "The messengers and him after all. I say, captain, we owe you an apology—"

"Somebody here owes me more than that!" was the interruption. "If some of you men do not know me let me say that I am Claude Crecy of whom you perhaps have heard. There's a dead man up the mountain. He was my pard;

his blood stain the floor of my cabin. He was killed by two men from Gold Gulch Camp. I am here for satisfaction."

The road-agent spoke calmly to the five-and-twenty men whom he faced in the den.

At the words: "two men from Gold Gulch Camp," the all-night gamblers exchanged significant glances.

"They must have been 'Rappahoe's messengers," said Starbox aloud.

"Who were they?"

"Santa Jim and Quartz Dick."

"Are they here?"

"No! they haven't come back. They war sent to tell you that we had caught Buckskin."

"Ah!"

Claude's eyes flashed.

"We had 'im on his parole, but the fellar wouldn't stand it; he threw it up an' left camp."

The road-agent stepped from the rough counter which his back had touched during this colloquy, and the next instant the gamblers were looking into the muzzle of the revolver quickly thrust forward.

"You sent two men to tell me that you had captured an eel, eh?" fell derisively from his lips. "Do not tell me here that seventy men cannot keep one three hours! Your two messengers have not returned? Are you certain that they are not somewhere in camp with the blood of Poison Jack on their knives? I am here for vengeance, I tell you. I prefer the blood of Santa Jim and his pard, not that of the men who sent them to my cabin; but if I cannot get theirs I shall have that of their employers."

Claude had scarcely ceased before rapid glances toward the door to which his back was turned told him that some person was about to enter.

"Hyar ar' ther boys, cap'n," said one of the covered gamblers. "Ask for Old Nick, an' he'll turn up. Hyar ar' Santa and Dick!"

At that moment two rough-looking men crossed the threshold and the road-agent turned.

The recognition that instantly followed was mutual.

The two messengers saw the flash of Claude Crecy's eyes, and the revolver that darted vengefully at them. Their hands moved to their own weapons, but too late!

Two reports, so near together that they almost seemed one, filled the gambling den, and two men staggered out into the night shot through the brain!

Santa Jim and Dick had returned to camp at the wrong moment.

The last man shot had scarcely disappeared through the door when the avenger whirled upon the almost breathless spectators of the killing.

"If you want to play the game of death I am here to accommodate you!" he said, sternly facing the crowd, in which more than one hand clutched the butts of half-drawn revolvers. "Men of Gold Gulch, until to-night I have never raised my hand against one of your number. The two lying out yonder struck me when they gave Poison Dick the lengths of their blades. Shall we fight?"

"Thar's no use in doing that, captain," said Starbox, "vengeance has but one law hyar, and that is death. Ef Santa and Dick wiped your pard out, why we hev nothin' to say, of course not; but—"

The continuation of the speaker's remarks was interrupted by a cry of:

"'Rappahoe!"

At that moment the burly, dark-faced and long-haired leader of the camp entered the place. He looked as swarthy and as fierce as a Nubian lion.

"Who did thet out thar?" he exclaimed pointing to the door.

"Claude Crecy!"

The name was spoken by its owner as he wheeled at the question and faced 'Rappahoe.

An instant change came over the new arrival's face.

"Ef you did it, cap'n, you hed a cause," he said recognizing the road-agent at once. "Them boys did suthin' in the mountain—suthin' you didn't sanction!"

"They gave Jack their knives. You sent them, they tell me."

"Yes."

"To tell me that you had captured a man whom seventy men could not keep in camp!"

"We didn't; thet's a fact, Claude," answered 'Rappahoe with a sickly smile.

"Why didn't you send men who don't use their knives when they can't have their own way?"

'Rappahoe's eyes suddenly flashed.

He advanced a step with his dark eyes still fixed upon the Knight of the Mountain Trail.

"I sent Santa and Dick to yer retreat," he said slowly. "I am responsible for their goin' an' nobody else. Ef you hold the hull camp responsible you do wrong, Cap'n Claude. I am hyar to take my own part. I sent ther boys to ther mountain, but I didn't tell 'em ter knife Poison Jack ef they couldn't find you. My name is 'Rappahoe!'"

The last sentence was a challenge understood by all who heard it.

Two pistols were lifted simultaneously and two triggers were touched at the same time, but only one report was heard.

There reeled toward the door the figure of 'Rappahoe the King of Gold Gulch' as he was called, and there leaped after him the man from whose deadly revolver he had reeled!

Twenty pistols sent their bullets after the victor, but the leads either buried themselves in the rough door frame or lost their force in the darkness without.

Claude Crecy bounded over the three bodies that lay on the ground in front of the Wheel of Fortune, and as he turned toward the den, when but a few feet away, he saw the would-be avengers rush out.

"No more to-night!" he said to himself lowering the revolver which he had turned upon the crowd. "They would not hate me more than they already do if I took a dozen more lives. Gold Gulch will swarm with tigers from this hour. Death Rattle will not be permitted to sit at Rocky Rod's tables any more. I will never don that disguise again! To the men of the Gulch I shall henceforth be Claude Crecy, but to Dainty Dot—what?"

He turned away with the interrogative still quivering his lips, and as he had halted in the deep shadows of the nearest cabins, the infuriated men in front of the den did not see him.

He went swiftly down the deserted thoroughfare of the camp, and halted at the door of a rather tasty little cabin near the end of the line.

For several moments he leaned forward and listened with his ear close to the door, but all was still.

Then he ventured to push on the portals which to his surprise sprung back without the least noise, and at the threshold of the apartment thus revealed, he listened again.

Something drew him noiselessly and with an expression of intense curiosity on his face into the room, which was dimly lighted by the starbeams that came in at the western window.

The keen eyes of the road-agent detected the cot that stood near the window, and when he bent over it, he saw its lovely occupant dressed as he had often seen her in the mountains and among the mines of the Gulch!

Dainty Dot looked lovelier than ever asleep in the starlight in the little cabin which the rough men of the camp had built for her. Her door had no lock; there was not a key in the Gold Gulch.

Claude Crecy gazed upon this tableau with eyes full of admiration.

Suddenly the look was changed to one of triumph, and stooping quickly he lifted the beautiful sleeper in his arms.

Dainty Dot awoke with a start.

"Not a word!" whispered Claude with his lips at her ear. "Your safety depends on your silence. The men of the camp have turned against you just as I knew they would some day. Trust me for the present, and we will see if we cannot outwit Starbox and his pards."

Dainty Dot seemed a feather in the man's arms, so far as her weight was concerned. He carried her into the street and thence toward the mountain that loomed the darkest before the camp.

He did not stop until far above the place, when he placed his captive upon her feet and her eyes met his gaze.

"Who are you?" she asked. "I have been thanking Zack Dragon for this assistance; but you are not him!"

"No."

"Then you will not hesitate to name yourself. You know me and my mission?"

At the mention of her mission, the mountain bandit seemed to start.

"I am one whom you can trust if you will," he said. "You will start when you hear my name. It is Claude Crecy!"

Dainty Dot did start. She recoiled from the road-agent with a thrilling cry.

"Claude Crecy! the man who took my father's life! Can it be that I have encountered you at last! You have carried me to the mountains that I might leave you to the vultures that frequent them!"

The girl's hand flew rapidly to her belt, but Claude darted forward and his bronzed hand closed on her snowy wrist.

"Not yet, my seraph!" he said, devilishly, while his dark eyes fairly twinkled with triumph. "I did not carry you hither to tell you that I was Claude just to receive your bullet. I have another purpose in view. You have reigned as Gold Gulch's queen long enough. I am going to erect another throne for you. You shall become Claude Crecy's wife, as you are now his queen!"

The girl could not suppress a cry.

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT FOLLOWED A BEAR HUNT.

"LOOK, Buckskin! The mountain trail is ended. Dandy Red has led you to the white robber's lodge."

The outstretched finger of the Indian speaker was pointing at a cabin near which he and the detective had halted.

"Indeed you have, Dandy," was his reply, as he gazed. "If Claude is in there, he is asleep."

Not a sound came from the spot occupied by the little cabin, and Buckskin Frank was about to creep forward to reconnoiter, when the Indian touched his arm.

"Dandy go first," he said, and glided away before he could be detained.

Presently the red-skin came back with the information that all was still within and around the road-agent's retreat.

"We have him, then!" ejaculated the detective. "Come on, Dandy."

The twain advanced together, and were soon crouching in the star-light near the entrance to the cabin. In the hand of each was a revolver.

Suddenly there pealed from the Indian's throat a signal not unlike a bird call. It penetrated the dark interior of the hut whose door was opened, but no responsive sound was heard, no figure presented itself at the entrance.

The detective showed his disappointment in his looks.

"Nobody in there, Buckskin," said Dandy Red. "Ingin go see, anyhow."

With the blade of his knife clutched between his teeth, the snake-like red-skin crept into the hut.

All at once the detective heard an exclamation of surprise from his lips, and the next moment Dandy Red was at his side.

"Dead man in there," he said.

"Claude Crecy dead?"

"Don't know, brother; but Dandy's hand move over a cold face."

"Impossible!"

Buckskin Frank sprang into the hut himself, and the Indian guided him in the gloom to the "cold face" which he had just touched.

"I'll solve this mystery," said the detective, producing a lucifer match, which he struck and held near the dead man.

A cry burst from the throat of red and white.

"Poison Jack, Buckskin," said the Indian, glancing from the dead to his companion's face.

"Who kill him, I wonder?"

"You'll have to ask some one else."

The detective rose with the flickering match in his hand. A puzzled and disappointed expression sat enthroned on his countenance.

Had Claude Crecy returned to the cabin and slain his main stay, Poison Jack?

At that moment the road-agent was facing the miners and gamblers of Gold Gulch Camp in the Wheel of Fortune.

"Claude has done this, Dandy!" said the detective, glancing at the dead. "Wolves fall out among themselves sometimes."

"No, Claude no kill Jack."

"Who then?"

"Dandy cannot tell. Claude will come back."

"Then let us wait for him here."

"Just as Buckskin says. Dandy Red remembers the Alamosa."

In the darkness of the bandit's retreat the man-hunters concluded to wait for the return of the tiger.

Far beyond and above the door they could see the shimmering stars and hear the night-winds among the mountain shrubbery.

A long dreary hour passed away. Not a startling sound of any kind had broken its length. At the end of it, however, a stranger noise entered the cabin and carried the red-skin's hand to the detective's wrist.

Buckskin Frank cocked his revolver as he stepped toward the door.

"Injun make that noise, Buckskin," said Dandy Red, at his elbow.

"An Indian? Is he your friend?"

"Mebbe so."

"Is he Claude's enemy?"

"That Dandy Red can't tell."

The sound was undoubtedly a signal of some kind, and the detective was about to investigate it, when Dandy Red sprang between him and the door and kept him back.

"Bear comin'!" were the words the red-skin uttered.

A minute later, there at the door was a grizzly so huge and hideous that the detective involuntarily recoiled.

"Bear smell Poison Jack's blood," said the Indian in the lowest of whispers, as he attempted to push the detective further back.

For a moment the animal firmly planted in front of the door snuffed the air with elevated nostrils, but did not advance inside. The couple thus penned up stood ready for the combat which they considered unavoidable—the detective with a knife in one hand and a revolver in the other. Dandy Red was similarly armed.

All at once something like a snake dropped upon the grizzly's neck, and the next instant a series of wild whoops awoke the echoes of the mountain.

The bear had been lassoed!

With ferocious growls the maddened animal tried to tear the choking cord from his neck, and his contortions became dreadful.

"Injuns at other end of lasso!" exclaimed Dandy Red. "They hold grizzly fast till they fix him with their arrows."

"One lasso cannot hold a bear," said the detective. "I will not believe that."

"Injuns put two together."

It was true as Buckskin Frank discovered by creeping to the door. The grizzly was in the coils of two lariats twisted together. His eyes followed the rope which stretched upward, and he saw a number of figures holding for dear life to the other end.

Ten Indians well braced against the rocks above, were pitting their strength against that of the monster whom their prowess had secured.

Suddenly the whiz and the thud of a feathered arrow struck on the spectators' ears. The shaft buried itself in the shoulder of the bear; then another, and others followed in quick succession. Few went amiss, and one of those buried itself in a log not more than an inch from the detective's head.

A light laugh fell from Dandy Red's lips as Buckskin Frank instinctively drew back.

The struggles of the half-choked bear subsided at last. The red-skins were too much for him. Suddenly the ground before the cabin seemed to swarm with the attacking party.

They rushed upon the grizzly with arrows drawn to the barb, and sent them deep among his vitals. Not until more than thirty of these terrible shafts had pierced him, did the bear give up, and when he fell heavily on the ground fighting and defiant to the last, his huge body blocked up the doorway of the cabin.

"We shall be routed now," muttered Buckskin Frank. "The Indians will invade this cabin; they will find us and Poison Jack's body. If they are Claude's friends they will lay Jack's death at my door. Dandy?"

He could address his companion in safety for loud cries were attesting the termination of the battle between red men and bear.

In reply to the call, the young Indian glided to his side.

"Well, Buckskin?"

"You have seen the bear-killers."

"They no like Dandy; they all Devil Claude's friends."

"I thought so."

"What Buckskin goin' to do?"

"We must leave this shanty."

"By the door, brother?"

"By the door!"

"Dandy Red ready!"

The detective knew that the red bear-hunters would soon inspect the interior of the cabin.

While they were friendly to the road-agent, they could not restrain themselves when his unguarded hut stood before them; they would enter and greedily plunder it before its owner could return.

And for the detective and his red pard, entry meant discovery, perhaps death.

"Claude gone away," suddenly said one of the bear-hunters as he stuck his head inside the door on a tour of inspection. "Him left cabin for good, mebbe."

An instant later the body of the speaker was half-way inside, and several other heads were moving forward.

The dead bear and its juicy steaks and valuable hide were fast being forgotten.

Thievery and plunder now animated the redskins.

"Follow me when I strike," whispered the detective to Dandy Red. "We've got to make a run for it."

As he spoke the last word, he dealt the most prominent Indian a blow with his fist—a blow that sent him reeling among his comrades, several of whom, forced over the carcass of the bear went to the ground with him!

The next second the man-hunter of Colorado sprung through the gap thus made and bounded away like a deer.

Dandy Red was at his heels.

Taken by surprise the bear-hunters did not recover for several moments, but when they did they uttered loud yells and darted in swift pursuit.

The Indian speedily caught up with the detective.

"This way, Buckskin!" he said, attempting to pull the man-hunter from the trail.

"No! let's give the rascals a taste of cold lead," and the detective halted and turned toward his pursuers with a revolver in each hand.

On came the hotly pursuing band, and as the eager Indians reached a spot thirty feet from the detective, jets of fire leaped from the demi-gloom and they recoiled from the deadly revolvers!

"There's an astonishing virtue in lead pills," laughed the slayer as he saw a number of pilgrims reel from before his weapons. "This is the true way to stop the red chasers and the only brave way, too!"

In less than a minute the only Indians in front of the deadly revolvers were those on the ground. The others had fled.

"We can go on now," said Buckskin Frank, as he turned to his companion. "They have but to follow us to have the dose repeated. We have missed Claude for to-night. If that infernal bear had not halted before the hut, we might have corraled the game; but as it is—"

"Halt!"

Buckskin Frank stopped suddenly in the trail down which he was advancing.

"We want you an' that Injun pard what stands at yer side!" continued the person who had spoken the command. "Lift yer weepins an' drop whar ye stand! This time we'll not trust ye with a parole."

The astonished detective could plainly see the six men who stood in the trail hardly ten feet in front of him; he could also catch the star-gleams that danced on the burnished barrels of their revolvers.

"Hands up, both ov ye! The men ov Gold Gulch mean bizness to-night, Buckskin!"

Against the six revolvers that completely covered them, what could the detective and Dandy Red do?

Their hands were at once elevated as far above their heads as they could be, and Catamount Luke and his men advanced with steady step, and eyes which did not for a moment leave the living targets before them.

"We want you fur ourselves this time, Buckskin," said Catamount. "Who killed Whirlwind Tom?"

"I did!" was the quick reply. "Under like circumstances I would kill you, Catamount, or any of your men!"

CHAPTER X.

REMEMBERING THE ALAMOSA.

THE fire of vengeance blazed in the eyes of the six desperadoes into whose hands Buckskin Frank and Dandy Red had fallen.

"What did ye wipe Whirlwind out fur?" inquired Catamount. "Ye war playin' Fancy Fred jes' then. Did Whirlwind diskiver who ye war?"

"I am compelled to answer no questions," said the detective, calmly, as he returned his questioner's look with interest.

"Mebbe ye will talk when the rope tightens er the locks click."

The detective's eyes flashed back a brave man's defiance.

"Now fur camp, boys!" continued Catamount, turning to his followers, and the little band turned toward the Gulch.

The red bear-hunters had evidently had enough of the detective's work with the revolver, for they did not return to the charge, and the journey back to Gold Gulch Camp was made without incident.

Daylight was breaking over the famous place when Catamount Luke led his followers and the prisoners down the one street of the camp. Mad, vengeful men glared at the latter with the illy suppressed ferocity of tigers; but not a hand was lifted against them.

All at once a man sprung to Catamount's

side and touched his sleeve as he imparted a bit of information in a tone which Buckskin Frank overheard:

"We're another citizen short since ye left camp, Catamount," were the words. "Dainty Dot has vamosed the Gulch."

The detective could not but start.

What had taken place that the girl should depart without warning to any one?

"She went to her shanty arter she faced 'Rappahoe an' told him that a certain somebody shouldn't be follered," continued the informant with a rapid glance at the detective. "She war thar arter midnight fur 'Mr.' Starbox looked in an' saw her asleep. Since Devil Claude left, though, she hesn't been seen."

"Let her go," replied Catamount. "We can't look arter her now. We've got other bizness afore us. We're goin' ter hev a trial."

He meant a "farce."

Fifteen minutes later the entire population of Gold Gulch Camp was assembled under the giant tree whose dense foliage shaded the Wheel of Fortune at certain hours of the day.

Buckskin Frank and Dandy Red were present, of course. As Catamount had jokingly remarked, they were the "most interested persons in the proceedings about to take place."

The sun was not yet up, and fresh in the memory of all were the thrilling events of the night just ended.

"Mr." Starbox was chosen judge-advocate of the hastily improvised court. The spectators were to constitute the jury, and on this farce the life of the western detective, Claude Crecy's foe, was to hang.

Dandy Red's eye quietly took in the dark-faced assembly that girted him in.

What was he to be tried for?

There was no fear visible in the eyes of the young Indian who stood at Buckskin's side; he was going to prove his gratitude won by a certain act at Alamosa, many months prior to the opening of our story, by dying with the man who had won it.

"You have been indicted by the men of Gold Gulch for the killing of Whirlwind Tom last night," said Starbox addressing the young detective. "What's your plea?"

"Guilty!"

Clear and without a tremor the answer rung through the natural court.

"That settles one case," resumed the judge, running his eye through the assemblage. "What's your pleasure, men?"

"I move thet he be stretched," said a voice from the crowd.

In less time than we can trace a line of these wild proceedings the motion was put by Starbox and carried without a dissenting voice. To all appearances not a man in the crowd, excepting the prisoners, of course, had refrained from voting.

"Now for the red-skin, jedge," said Catamount, nodding toward Dandy Red, who gave him a glance of unrelenting hatred.

"What's the charge?"

"Derned ef I know," was the puzzled Catamount's reply. "He hezn't killed anybody thet we knows of, but it wouldn't be good policy ter turn him loose arter hangin' his white pard. By George! try him fur ginerel cussidness. He's got ter be tried!"

"He might have been Buckskin's accomplice, seeing that both were together when captured," said Starbox.

"I never had an accomplice!" exclaimed the detective, turning full upon the speaker, who occupied a three-legged stool in the center of a table brought from the Wheel of Fortune.

"The blood of Whirlwind Tom is on my hands, on mine alone! That Indian united his fortunes with mine after that occurrence, and entirely of his own accord, although our trip to the mountains was made up at my instance. I did not come here to make war on the men of Gold Gulch Camp. I sought the life of Claude Crecy; that is well known now. You made war on me. Claude's thousand ounces of dust reward was too much for you. Whirlwind Tom, having discovered my identity, would have betrayed me for the pile. What would you have done under the circumstances? My revolver was at his temple; he held my identity, my life in his hands. The greed of gold was in his eyes; it fairly danced there. I ask you, men of Gold Gulch, what would you have done had you been me under such circumstances?"

"That question is not before the court," answered Starbox. "We're dealin' with the Injun now. Dandy Red."

At mention of his name, the athletic young red-skin stepped forward and faced the man on the deal table.

"Dandy listens."

With his figure drawn to its full stature, he looked nobler than ever. He was stripped to the waist, and the muscles stood out on his strong arms like a ship's ropes.

"We'll give you a choice, Dandy," said Starbox, leaning forward and looking the brave in the eye, while he spoke with a mock charitable air which every one understood. "I ought to have said 'a chance,' perhaps. Which would you rather receive, four hundred lashes on the bare back, or the rope?"

At mention of a whipping, such as is sometimes administered by lynch law in the far West, the Indian seemed to recoil, then his dark eyes blazed with resentment, and he whirled, and placed his hand on Buckskin Frank's arm.

"Dandy Red and Buckskin are brothers!" he exclaimed, throwing a defiant glance through the anxious crowd. "Dandy will stand by his brother to the end of the trail. He has not forgotten the Alamosa!"

"Jes' what I thought he'd do between ther two!" remarked Catamount, in audible tones, to a companion. "Thar's no discount on thet wild-cat, ef he ar' a red one!"

"What shall be the Injun's doom?" asked Starbox, addressing the crowd.

"Giv' him what he hankers arter!" came the response, which was applauded by sentences of similar import.

Thereupon "Jedge" Starbox sentenced the prisoners.

They were to be hanged on the very tree beneath whose boughs they stood at that moment.

"When?"

Within the next ten minutes!

"I appoint Catamount Luke General High Sheriff of the execution," finished Starbox, and a moment later two ropes hung from the best bough of the tree.

Up to that moment the hands of the doomed twain had not been bound. When they were guarded by sixty men, whose hands were almost at the butts of deadly revolvers, why bind the hands of two prisoners?

"This is fur Whirlwind Tom!" said Catamount, advancing upon the detective, with revenge in his blood-shot eyes. "We ar' losin' the thousand ounces by pullin' ye up on our own account, for Claude wouldn't give Gold Gulch Camp a picayune fur ye now. He war back hyar the second time last night, an' we didn't part friends. An', it's on account ov thet visit thet 'Rappahoe, an' Santa Jim, an' Quartz Dick ar'n't hyar to see yer go."

Buckskin Frank seemed to start. He now knew why he and Dandy Red had failed to find the road-agent.

"Hurry up the hangin', Catamount!"

"Talk ter him arterward!" and kindred exclamations came from every side, and the executioner ordered the nooses to be adjusted over the prisoners' heads.

"The end of the trail is not here, brother!" said Dandy Red, in a low and hasty whisper. "Dandy remembers the Alamosa. See him prove it!"

The next second the young Indian was whirled half way round by the ruffian who held the noose of death in one hand.

"It is Dandy Red's time! White Camp dogs, stand back!"

The man with the noose was flung aside by one sweep of the young brave's left arm, while the other leaped from below his deer-skin belt a knife whose twelve-inch blade had a hiss as it cleft the air!

Nobody would have thought that inside of his buckskin leggings, the red-skin could conceal such a weapon as that.

The ruffians of Gold Gulch involuntarily recoiled from the sweep of the Indian bowie.

A loud yell pealed from Dandy Red's throat, and before any one could divine his intention, he cast himself with a tigerish bound upon Catamount Luke, the man most anxious to see him hanged.

"The rope for Dandy Red, the knife for Catamount!" fell from the Indian's lips as a blow was struck with that terrible knife, and the dark-faced victim reeled away.

"Shoot the red greaser to pieces!" cried the excited spectators.

"Dandy Red can shoot, too."

In the twinkling of an eye as it were the Indian had jerked Catamount's two revolvers from his belt, and as the crowd faced him his red arms were thrust forward with six chambers freighted with death at the end of each.

The next moment two more men sprung to the red-skin's side. One was Buckskin Frank, with a pistol in his hand, the other was—

Dragon, the old stage-driver, who had just given the detective the weapon he held.

Such was the thrilling tableau that presented itself under the lynch-tree as the sun crept over the rough rocks of Gold Gulch.

The lives of many depended on the slightest action.

"Mr." Starbox stood on the table, rendered speechless by amazement and horror.

Something had to be done to break the spell.

"We'll call this a draw," he said. "The hanging will not take place to-day. The prisoners are discharged."

The hard crowd looked up at the speaker, but the gravity visible on his face told that he was in earnest.

"We'll fight it out another time!" continued Starbox. "If Catamount is dead, woe to red-skin!"

Who doubted Catamount's death after the blow which the naked red arm had delivered in sight of all?

He lay on the ground at Dandy Red's feet, and near him lay the bowie. Its blade was white no longer.

"What says my white brother now?" said the Indian, glancing at the detective. "Does he believe that Dandy Red will ever forget the Alamosa?"

Buckskin's reply was a glance that spoke volumes, although his lips said:

"Draw on me hereafter for anything you want, even to my life. The call will be honored."

CHAPTER XI.

CLAUDE PLAYS A NEW GAME.

DARING and desperate as some men are, there are times when they quail in the face of danger.

Mounted on the table, and he the judge of the court, "Mr." Starbox had considered the desperation of his own situation.

A rapid glance from Dandy Red's eyes had told him that at the opening of hostilities he would, unless the young Indian was immediately shot down, tumble headlong from his elevated position.

He had therefore an eye on personal safety when he adjourned court and declared that the prisoners were discharged.

"Dandy Red had knife hid in his trousers all along," said the Indian, with a grin, to the detective. "Him watchin' fur his chance, that's all. Catamount too eager to hang Dandy, eh? Him never try to hang 'nother Injun!"

Truer words were never spoken. The men who raised Dandy Red's victim saw his expressionless eyes and searched in vain for his pulse.

The hard crowd accepted Starbox's decision, but with many oaths that were not loud but deep, and Buckskin Frank found himself leaving camp with the Indian and Zack Dragon.

The old stage-driver was anxious to hear of Dainty Dot, about whose strange disappearance from Gold Gulch he knew no more than those whom he had left behind.

The girl was really gone; that was certain.

"What does she think of me now, Zack?" asked the detective, eagerly.

"She b'lieves in you."

"What? Say that again, Zack."

"She b'lieves that you ar' the genuine Frank Fargo, the man what left her two years ago to hunt down the man what shot her father in a stage on the Salt Lake-Denver Trail. Last night she went back on you, you know. Wal, thet war because she could not think that the dead could come to life, for she got news of your death long ago. But when I told her about yer career in Denver, and she had put this and thet together, she changed her mind. Then she wrote thet note I delivered to you in the Wheel of Fortune, an' afterward she faced 'Rappahoe an' his pards, an' told 'em thet ef they follered you, somebody might git hurt. She's a daisy, thet Dainty Dot is, Buckskin."

"But why did she desert Salt Lake for this country?"

"When she heard thet you war dead, she made up her mind ter hunt Claude Crecy herself. Thet's why she come hyar. Ov course Gold Gulch took her in an' nicknamed her Dainty Dot. Claude Crecy come down hyar often, but it war ez Death Rattle, the man you met last night. Dainty didn't know him, an' thet few roughs what did wouldn't post her. So she lived hyar on the lookout fur Devil Claude, an' saw him night after night."

"She buried Whirlwind Tom or had it done?"

"I did it, Buckskin," was the reply. "She found the carkiss in front ov Catamount's shanty, an' her good judgment told her who had r'iped him out, so she told me to plant him ar' I did so."

"But he was found?"

"Yes. His pards got suspicious an' s'arched every place fur him. Of course the body war found; then Catamount an' his six men took an oath of vengeance an' started out arter you."

This conversation took place a short distance beyond the confines of the desperadoes' camp.

The trio had been permitted to depart unmolested, although they had been served with a notice that henceforth between them and the roughs of Colorado there was quenchless hatred, eternal war.

They would be hunted and shot on sight!

If captured they were not to be accorded the proceedings of even a lynch court. Starbox had told them that they would find more enemies on their trail than they could manage.

To all this the three had returned nothing but defiant looks. Dandy Red, the Indian, would have replied in mad eloquence if a glance from the detective had not checked him, and in this manner the camp was left behind.

We need not say that Buckskin Frank listened with much interest to Zack Dragon's narrative. It had imparted the pleasing intelligence that Dainty Dot had at last recognized him as the lover who had quitted her side to avenge her father's death.

He was now to find her and to measure knives again or cross pistols with Claude Crecy, the king of road-agents.

From an elevated spot on the main mountain not far from the scene of many of the events of our romance, the trio looked down into Gold Gulch. The sun was creeping zenithward, and they could see a crowd in front of the Wheel of Fortune.

"An indignation meetin'," smiled the detective as with folded arms he surveyed the spectacle. "I'd like to be a listener, and yet I suppose we're safer where we are."

"I should say so, cap'n," returned old Zack. "Thar's a fellar on a bar'l down thar, ef my eyes don't deceive me. I can't recognize him by the cut ov his anatomy at this distance; but I'd call 'im "Mr." Starbox, the feller what hez a brother-in-law in Congress. Thar's whar he got the polite handle to his name. It'll be thet Honorable "Mr." Starbox one ov these days ef he doesn't run ag'in' a bullet."

Dandy Red was leaning against a rock with his eyes fixed on the distant crowd. At the mention of his late judge's name, however, he started forward and his eyes gleamed with intense hatred.

"Ther Injun's r'iled," whispered Zack to the detective.

For some moments the young brave glared at the assemblage with the eyes of a tiger.

"The man what gave Dandy Red his choice spraks to the white wolves," he suddenly exclaimed as his outstretched hand pointed toward the camp. "By-'m-by Dandy give him choice mebbe. It makes his heart hot to look!" and turning suddenly from the scene below them, the Indian walked away.

"He's taking us toward Claude's cabin," murmured the detective. "This time I trust we will catch the master at home."

But all three were doomed to disappointment, for they found the cabin deserted after a cautious approach.

Blood in front of the door told where the Indians had finished the bear, and an inspection of the hut itself showed more blood on the planks that formed the floor. This was the life gore of Poison Jack, but his body had been removed, doubtless by the man whom he had so faithfully served—Claude Crecy.

"This hut has been abandoned forever by Claude," said Buckskin after the inspection.

"What makes you think so, cap'n?"

"There's nothing valuable left in it. Last night when Dandy Red and I were here, it was a regular arsenal."

"The red bear-hunters may hev plundered it."

"That is true, Zack, but I think Claude has been here."

"Injuns Claude's friends," said Dandy Red at this juncture. "They might take a pistol or two, but no take everything."

"That's my opinion exactly."

Of all the plunder that the road-agents' daring had collected during a number of years, not so much as a silver watch was to be found at the cabin. The three did not prolong a search which a brief inspection had told the detective would result in nothing.

"We don't want his plunder, but the man himself!" Buckskin said. "He is the game I have been hunting these two years. This trail was beginning to seem an endless one when he stopped the mail-coach yesterday and got the

bags. Last night I stood face to face with him, but to-day he is not in sight. Never mind. I will get him yet."

"If Dainty Dot doesn't," put in Zack with a grin.

"She's got the best right to mete justice out to him; I'll admit that, Zack, but I don't want her fair hands stained with anybody's blood, not even with his!"

At that instant a low exclamation from Dandy Red, who was stationed at the door of the bandits' cabin, drew the twain's attention in that direction.

"Stage comin'," said the Indian. "Don't my brothers hear it?"

"I do," said the detective, who had listened a moment.

"It's ther reg'lar mail from Salt Lake. Tom Texas ought ter be on ther box. I know 'im."

Zack appeared eager to leave the cabin and rush down to the trail.

"Claude may stop stage in his old place," said the Indian.

"He'll do anything. Let us go and see the stage pass the spot."

"Have to be keerful, Buckskin," replied the Indian. "Claude git the drop on us mebbe, then—"

"Then there would be somebody shot, Dandy; that is what you were going to say," smiled the detective.

Dandy Red did not reply.

The trio now glided from the hut on the mountain side and were guided by the Indian through a sunless defile to a spot slightly elevated above the old stage trail. Almost directly facing them was a deep ravine, whose mouth opened upon the trail itself; the opening was twenty feet wide and more than half filled with a thick growth of mountain brushwood.

The approach of the stage was now plainly heard by the three; the sounds enabled them to follow it as it rounded the rocky curves and bowled over the lonely trail to the cracks of the driver's whip, and his constant shoutings to the train.

"Thar she comes with Texas in his place!" suddenly exclaimed old Zack, as the four horses appeared in sight.

"And yonder is Claude himself!"

The last sentence had fallen from the detective's lips, and an instant later the eyes of all were staring at the handsome man who had leaped from the ravine and, doubly armed, awaited the stage at its mouth.

Buckskin Frank instinctively cocked his revolver as his left hand parted the bushes before his face, but at that moment Claude sprang toward the horses and his loud "Halt!" rung out on the morning air.

"Texas ar' no fool!" ejaculated Zack, in a low tone, as the driver reined in the four steeds. "Bill, ov San Jose, tried to run over Claude once. He never drove another stage arterward."

"Throw out the bags!" swiftly followed the "halt," and almost before the last words had ceased to echo around the road-agent, two leather sacks fell at his feet.

"Now!" exclaimed the detective, "cover him, but don't fire until I give the signal!"

The three sprang up and Buckskin Frank's voice startled every one who heard.

"Stand where you are, Claude, and up with your hands!" he cried. "This is a game in which I am going to take a hand!"

The eyes of the mountain robber instantly recognized the speaker as his old enemy—the man who had hunted him so long.

For a moment his gaze was a flash of rage, and then, with the agility of a panther, he leaped at the nearest stage horse.

"Fire!" cried the detective.

Three revolvers spoke, but the next second one of the four horses was flying down the trail mounted by Claude Crecy.

In the twinkling of an eye the knight of the trail had cut the leader loose, and was being carried away on his back!

"That beats my time all holler!" exclaimed old Zack, as he gazed after the road agent with the smoking pistol in his hand.

Buckskin Frank, the detective, did not reply. He, too, was looking in the same direction; but his gaze was one of baffled rage and astonishment!

Claude had again outwitted him!

CHAPTER XII.

EXCITING EVENTS.

A few bounds carried the three to the stage whose passengers had alighted.

Buckskin Frank sprang toward Tom Texas, the driver, as that worthy touched the ground.

"What's that horse worth?" he demanded, pointing to the one left by Claude in the lead.

"He belongs to the contractor."

"Where is he?"

"I'm that person."

The last speaker, a well-dressed man with a massive gold neck-chain, stood before the detective as he turned.

"Will you sell that horse? Quick! I can't waste words!" said Buckskin.

"Who are you?"

"Buckskin Frank."

"Then take the animal. You've saved the mules, and probably our lives."

"Thanks."

The detective was speedily mounted.

"No rest now till I've run Claude Crecy down!" he said to the little crowd that stared at him. "Dandy Red, I will never forget the Alamosa; you may depend on that. We'll meet again—perhaps!" and with this doubt, he dashed his boot-heels against the horse's flanks and was off like a meteor.

Already the speed of Claude's horse, and the windings of the stage trail, had hid the bandit from view, and a short time sufficed to hide the detective from the sight of those who gazed after him.

Claude had secured a good start; but Buckskin Frank urged his horse on, utterly regardless of the many loose rocks that rolled from under his feet, and constantly threatened his safety.

It was a chase that ended for the present, so far as the pursuer was concerned, in a narrow gorge several miles from the point of attack, and some distance from the regular trail.

The detective drew rein there and took in his surroundings and prospects at a glance.

Fresh hoof-marks leading from the stage road had caught his eye at a certain point, and led him to the spot where he now sat on his heated steed's back, baffled by the man he wanted.

All at once the stillness around him was broken by a loud report, and the detective felt his horse gradually sinking beneath him! He sprang to the ground and drew his revolvers as he faced in the direction of the shot.

No foe appeared.

"You can foot it now, Buckskin!" said a voice, while yet no man was to be seen. "Go back and pay the old contractor for his horse."

An exclamation of rage burst from the detective's throat.

"I know you, Claude Crecy! Come out and fight me!" he cried.

"I guess not. Will you not go back?"

"Not until I have accomplished my sworn mission!"

"Which is my death?"

"Yes!"

"Then I'll end your hunt where you stand. But let Claude Crecy tell you first, Frank Fargo, that Dainty Dot is completely in my power, and that while you rot in this gulch, she will reign queen in a better camp than Gold Gulch."

"Not as your wife, though."

"As Claude Crecy's wife!"

"Never, villain!"

Buckskin Frank sprang toward the spot from whence the voice had proceeded, for he had caught a glimpse of a face behind the dense shrubbery, and the gleam of a revolver barrel.

At that moment the bushes parted, and the next a flash of fire leaped into his face, and he staggered back like a man shot through the brain!

"I'm the man you followed too long!" said the road-agent, stepping into full view as the smoke of his deadly shot rose above his head.

"You forgot, Buckskin Frank, that I am Claude Crecy. The trail is ended at last, and the oath you took in the girl's presence will never be kept."

The detective had fallen against the wall of the gorge. As Claude approached the body it slipped to the ground, where it lay motionless.

"You made yourself my foe for a girl's love," the road-agent continued. "I guess we're even now!"

Five minutes later the only occupants of the tragic place were the detective and his horse. To a certainty, as it seemed, Claude had put an end to the long hunt.

If he had remained in the gorge a minute longer, he would have seen the supposed dead man move, the eyes open, and one of the hands creep to the bloodiest of faces.

"The end of the trail is not yet!" muttered the detective, as his eyes flashed. "A skull scraped is better than a bullet in the brain."

He rose with difficulty and staggered to a shady spot a few yards away. There he fell

rather than laid himself down on the cool grass.

"White hunter chase Claude no more, him says," fell suddenly on the detective's ears.

"Red Beaver is to have one of the white man's pistols; his brothers can take the rest of his things."

Buckskin Frank drew his body further back among the bushes that partly surrounded him. Claude Crecy had met a party of Indians whom he had sent to plunder the supposed corpse of his old foe!

"The red thieves shall find the liveliest dead man they ever attempted to plunder," he said to himself, as he fixed his eyes on the trail that led westward. "I am worth at least twenty dead men yet."

At this moment six Indians came in sight, and a cry of joy broke from their lips as they beheld the dead horse lying almost directly in front of Buckskin's retreat.

Several bounds carried the red crowd to the spot, but an exclamation of disappointment immediately followed the halt by the horse.

"Where Buckskin? Him no walk away after Claude shoot!" they cried. "Claude say him leave him dead near his boss, but him no here. Gona, sure!"

"They will find me after a moment's hunt," murmured Buckskin. "There is blood on the trail I made from the spot where I fell to this place. I might as well open the battle now."

Bracing himself on one foot and knee, the detective thrust his weapons forward.

"Here I am, red thieves!" he cried, in a voice that made every Indian turn, and an instant later the six were reeling from the death-flashes of his six-shooters.

All but one fell over the prostrate horse in less time than we can record the fact, and that one fled for his life at a speed that almost defied the pursuit of a bullet.

Buckskin Frank, however, sent one after him, and saw him wheel half-way round as if struck, but as he kept on he (the detective) concluded that no mortal wound had been inflicted.

A smile of grim satisfaction overspread the man-hunter's face when he found himself the victor of the short engagement although but one side had done the firing.

"Your plunderers meet with rather poor luck, Claude," he laughed aloud. "The next time you send them forth, I advise you to satisfy yourself that your victim is dead enough to submit to the indignity. Now, if I can leave this place, I will do so, and hunt you again."

The detective found himself strong enough to move from the almost fatal spot. In a little spring at the foot of the wall of the gorge he bathed his face and the clear waters showed him the furrow made by the road-agent's ball.

"Turn about is fair play. I gave him a wound just like this in Otamound's cabin last night," he said. "The next time one of us must shoot truer. I will be that one!"

Where was Claude Crecy at this time?

Riding slowly over a winding trail on the horse which he had dextrously cut from the mail team, thereby saving his precious life, was the road-agent, a gleam of satisfaction in his eye.

"Gold Gulch will be against me, of course, but I don't care for that!" he said as if addressing a party at his side, for he spoke aloud. "Then, Congress will be asked to look after me, if the fat Congressman gets his terrible resolutions in. I need not fear Congress either. The only man that stood between me and Dot is out of my road now, and I can begin the other game. I must visit Gold Gulch before I bid the road farewell, but I'll not go down alone this time. I just want to show 'Mr.' Starbox and his pals that Claude Crecy can marshal an army at a signal. What if the faces of my pals are not white; more than half of them carry gold watches, and that is something precious few of Gold Gulch's citizens do."

At the end of an hour the road-agent drew rein in a picturesque ravine almost on a level with Gold Gulch Camp some miles away.

He left his horse which was not loth to rest, and parted the bushes that rose before him with his hands. As he advanced, the mountain brake seemed to grow denser, but all at once he came upon a small log building before whose door stood a magnificent specimen of the Indian race.

"Claude come back at last!" exclaimed the red-skin, at sight of the road agent.

"How's my bird?"

"She no speak to the Fox. Claude go in and see."

"I'll find her tongue," replied the Stage Terror, pushing past the red guard.

As he threw open the door, the beautiful face and undaunted eyes of Dainty Dot met his gaze.

"At last, my beauty, we can look forward to an unmolested honeymoon," he said. "My persistent enemy has left the trail with his eyes mission unaccomplished!"

Triumph blazed up in Claude's eyes as he spoke.

"I understand you. You would make me believe that Buckskin Frank is dead," the girlbox said.

"Dead he is—at last."

Instead of recoiling from him with a cry of horror, Dainty Dot stood erect and said firmly: "Death!"

"In your triumph never for a moment forget this that I live!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE AVENGERS OF GOLD GULCH.

THE result of the attempted lynching of the whole detective and Dandy Red gave rise to an indignation meeting at Gold Gulch Camp.

Not far from the assembly, covered with a blanket, lay the young Indian's victim—Cata-ers mount Luke. The rough would never seek to touch put the bargman's rope over another red-skin's head, for Dandy Red's one blow with the knife concealed in his leggings had put a bloody drive period to his career.

The most prominent character at the indignation meeting was the redoubtable Starbox, the late judge of the lynch court.

He declared that Buckskin Frank, Zack Dragon and the Indian should be hunted down and shot on sight. For the moment Claude Crecy and his last exploits at the Wheel of Fortune were forgotten. The clods of the Gulch had scarcely fallen upon Rappahoe and his two messengers before they, too, were for gotten for the men who had escaped the noose and snare.

The camp teemed with excitement. Rocky Rod's counters and not his tables were now thronged. Nobody thought of play, and the proprietor of the Wheel offered to close his den and join the hunt for vengeance.

"By Jovel we'll skin that young Injun alive!" was a common expression. "Catty a fl mount war a brick! He never flunked when I pard asked him for a dollar."

We might almost say and keep within the bounds of truth, that the meeting closed with a general rush toward the mountain. Gold Gulch was nearly deserted half an hour after the adjournment.

Rocky Rod and a few others remained "keep house" as they expressed it; but the cards were allowed to remain idle while across the bar of the gambling den the terrible even of the last few hours were discussed.

The avengers were led by "Mr." Starbox, who could boast, as well as trail a foe. Notwithstanding his boastings, he was a man of nerve, a desperado like those by whom he was surrounded.

He had seen better days than the present; the wild West had made him wild and reckless. "Boys, we've run the game down," he said as he turned with gleaming eyes upon the thirteen men at his back, in one of the broken pawns of the mountain above the camp.

"What's that, cap'n?"

"Come here an' listen—two at a time."

Starbox stood at the almost concealed mouth of a cavern. A lot of vines overhung the place, but the rough's sharp eyes had discovered that they had lately been lifted, and that by the hand of man.

"Now, hold your ears right thar, an' listen for a moment," he said to the two men who stood in response to his last words.

For a little while the twain held their breath close to the creeps, and all at once their eyes met their leader's gaze.

"They're in thar!" said one. "I kin hear Zack Dragon's voice. He's tellin' some about his last tussle with Claude, an' that body ar' Buckskin or the Injun, ov course."

"Ov course!" was the echo.

"Who knows this cave?" asked Starbox, fixing his eye over the gang.

"I do."

"What about it, Mexy?"

Mexy was a youthful son of Mexico, the person with Spanish blood in his veins who permitted to inhabit Gold Gulch Camp. more than seventeen, he was known for a son whose courage was unquestioned, and thoroughly knew the mountains of Colorado.

"It's the cave in which Mexy and the had their fight, senior," he said, addressing Starbox.

"Then you do know it, for that grizzly"

face escorted you all through it, ef I recollect the story of that tussle," smiled the chief of the ward avengers.

"My But Mexy got him at last!" with flashing eyes. "Shall I lead you, seniors?"

"Yes."

The Mexican drew his bowie as he parted the vines, and went forward stooping.

"Do you mean for all to follow?" asked Starbox.

"Yes, senior."

"Then come on, boys. We've corraled the three. They needn't ter see another sunset. Death on sight! That's the motto. No foolin' forget this time."

Guided by the Mexican, who professed a thorough knowledge of the mountain cavern, gained by an encounter with a bear in its depths some time prior to the present visit, the whole party crept forward, and found themselves in a dark corridor.

We need not say that revolvers were carried withcocked and knives unsheathed as the man-hunters glided on, led by one in whom they had took much confidence.

skin's Every now and then they would halt and knife the well-known voice of the old stage-driver. It guided them on and on, until Mexy suddenly stopped and laid his hand on Starbox's wrist.

Starbox. "They're in the big round chamber where Mexy fought the bear," he said in the lowest of hispers. "We're above them. We can do it."

Claude. "What better will the boys ask?" returned Starbox elated at the prospect before them.

of the "They got fire, too, just to help us," continued the Mexican.

re for "Good again! Fortune is givin' us a share of noose smiles hyar, if she doesn't give us many fits at ther Wheel!"

es were Not far ahead was to be seen indications of a ay, anight being below the trailers, and a few minutes later Mexy, the yellow guide, led Starbox to a pot from which he could gaze down into a

Inj large circular chamber which was illuminated "Cat a fire."

when This was not all.

In the light of the fire two figures were visible—one that of a white man the other an Indian's, as was easily seen.

in this "Whar's Buckskin?" queried Starbox, not a little disappointed for he had immediately recognized the occupants of the cavern.

the mob "Senior Buckskin not there now."

"He may come directly, but I want the boys to see the tableau down thar."

Starbox crept back to his men.

"Go for'ard, pards, an' look down inter thar hole; but, mind ye, no shootin' till I'm ready."

Starbox. "We want all three at once."

Like specters, but armed to the teeth, the dark shirted avengers of Gold Gulch glided forward and peered over the edge of the wall of

sent; bone.

reckle The sight that met their gaze could hardly he strain them, and it is probable that they the thould have sent a volley of revolver balls at the vain below, if Starbox had not whispered

ken pa "No shootin'! The man what disobeys joins back and Dandy Red with a lead mine in his

rain!"

For ten minutes the avengers looked upon the tableau to which Mexy had guided them. They were waiting for Buckskin Frank to join

is friends, for they, of course knew nothing of the events which had separated the three.

By and by the men of Gold Gulch grew impatient.

"Buckskin isn't comin'! He's off somewhar after Claude. Better make sure work ov the two we've corraled!" They said.

Starbox looked at the growlers and resolute-shook his head.

"Wait!" he said. "I've got a new plan. We might hev a hangin' hyar, arter all. Thet could be better than a dead shootin' scrape."

"I'd rather see the Injun's neck stretch, but stretch it ef ye kin, cap'n!"

Starbox smiled.

"Men must sleep," he said in a low voice. They think they're safe hyar. They won't even put their fire out."

Ten minutes later Dandy Red and Old Zack began to show signs of weariness, and to the joy of the roughs of Gold Gulch they at last threw their forms on the ground in the glow of the re beginning to die out.

Why should they extinguish it!

Were they not in one of the many secluded

aves of Colorado—caverns hardly known to bite and red, and very seldom visited by four-footed prowlers?

grizzly

"How did you get down thar thet time, Mexy?" asked Starbox, turning to the guide.

"By the lazo, senior."

"I can go down that way, too."

The rope brought along for a certain purpose was now uncoiled, and a stirrup formed at one end by the Mexican's deft fingers.

"Hold me well, boys," said Starbox as he stepped into the stirrup as it dangled over the edge of the wall. "Let me down eay, an' we'll hev ther quickest an' ther neatest hangin' this old cave ever hed. Some ov ye might 'kiver' Zack an' Dandy ez I go down, fur thar's no tellin' what might happen. You know what thet young Injun did at camp!"

Lowered by five stalwart men, "Mr." Starbox slowly descended toward the sleepers fifty feet below the edge of the wall. He clung to the rope with his left hand; his right clutched the butt of a revolver, and his eyes were fastened on the foe beneath him.

Once, when he was midway between friend and foe, he glanced up at the former with eyes that fairly gleamed with ferocious triumph; then looked downward again.

All at once the young Indian sprang up, and so quickly that he totally frustrated the aim of the men whose revolvers were covering him.

A wild, mad oath fell from "Mr." Starbox's lips!

It was his last.

Quicker than a flash Dandy Red's revolver had covered him, and the next instant, while the report of the shot filled the cavern, he was spinning round and round like a giddy man!

Zack Dragon leaped to his feet.

Be saw Dandy Red's and the dying brands in every direction by a flying kick, and just as he caught sight of a man's body being drawn rapidly upward, bang! bang! bang! went a number of pistols, and the cavern was darkness save where the embers glowed!

"Is brother hurt?" whispered a voice at his ear as a hand encircled his arm.

"No, but those devils will shoot till they kill. They are notsatisfied. The men ov Gold Gulch are above us!"

"Dandy Red know that. Him get awake an' see man comin' down on lasso. Dandy lay still an' watch 'im till him ready to shoot. Ugh!"

The Indian's last expression was occasioned by the fall of a heavy body on the floor of the cavern.

Then a voice was heard overhead:

"No more shootin' in the dark! The cap'n mayn't be dead!"

Dandy Red sprang forward and felt in the gloom for the man who had fallen from the rope.

His hand came suddenly in contact with a human face, but he uttered no cry.

"Shoot, boys, an' never mind me!" were the words that resounded throughout the cavern the following minute. "Death holds the call on me; but ther Injun still lives!"

A wild shout of vengeance came down from above; it encountered midway an ejaculation of Indian ferocity.

The next instant the whole ceiling of the subterranean cave was revealed by the flash of their twin revolvers, and something fell against Jack Dragon, and almost forced him to the wall.

"Ar' thet you, Dandy?" said the old man, clutching the object which was a human form.

A groan and a gasp replied, and then Zack felt his arms disengaged.

"Come, brother!" was said at his ear. "Dandy Red still wears the feathers of the eagle." And a hand that seemed wet with blood led him away.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LAST OF GOLD GULCH CAMP.

"WAAL, pard, what is it?" asked Rocky Rod of the tall, dirty-looking Indian that sauntered into the Wheel of Fortune during the absence from camp of Starbox and his band of avengers.

The red-skin took in the small crowd assembled in the den, and threw a little leathern sack of gold-dust upon the counter.

"Do yer treat the crowd?" asked Rod.

"Bison Hoof want white brothers to drink with him," was the answer, and as no citizen of Gold Gulch had ever been asked a second time to drink, the entire crowd came forward.

"Where rest?" continued the Indian, throwing an inquisitive glance round the room.

"Off on a man-hunt," was the answer.

"All gone?"

"All but ther corporal's guard you see hyar, Bison."

The red-skin seemed satisfied.

Half a minute later the liquor had been gulped down, paid for, and the Indian had disappeared.

"Clever greaser, thet," remarked Rocky Rod. "Bison Hoof war his handle, warn't it! Never hed ther pleasure ov meetin' 'im afore thet I know ov. Went off like powder. Didn't even stay fur return treat. Colorado's full of Injuns just like thet one."

If one of the occupants of the Wheel of Fortune had followed the "clever Indian" to the door, he might have seen him turn his face toward one of the mountain peaks that overlooked Gold Gulch, and wave above his head the loose panther-skin he wore on his shoulders.

What did that mean? It looked very like a signal.

A short time afterward there rode into the camp from toward that same mountain five-and-twenty red-skins headed by a person who, while his face was red like the faces of his followers, seemed more a white man than a red one.

"Halt!" went through the Indian ranks as the squadron halted in front of the Wheel of Fortune before Rocky Rod and his friends dreamed that Indians were near.

"Great Caesar's ghost! Bison Hoof hez brought some ov his friends inter the Gulch!" exclaimed the man who went to the door only to start back surprised.

"I knowed he war a clever red!" said Rocky Rod, as he leaned over the counter and then cleared it at a single bound.

A moment later he appeared in the doorway in dark gray shirt and with revolvers on his hips.

"Brother Rocky!" was the exclamation by which he was immediately recognized. "Why doesn't our brother come out an' shake hands with War Arrow?"

"In a minute," responded Rocky Rod, bounding back into the den.

His face was fearfully white when he turned it upon his companions again.

"Boys," he said, in a ghostly whisper, "boys, we've got to fight fur our lives. Them greasers out thar mean bizness. Their chief, War Arrow, is Claude Crecy!"

"No! no!"

"Fact! I'll sw'ar ter it! He couldn't deceive me. He's hyar ter kill! I allus said he would come back!"

For a moment the roughs of Gold Gulch seemed paralyzed.

"We've got our boots on," said one. "It's our time ter go under."

The last word still quivered the speaker's lips when a wild yell sounded through the camp, and a volley of pistol-balls came crashing through the planks of the old gambling den.

"What'd I tell yer!" cried Rocky Rod, springing back with cocked revolver. "Now, men, go in! an' when Starbox an' ther boys come back, let 'em find Claude Crecy an' his red devils stiff an' cold whar we hev died!"

At that moment the door of the den was closed, and locked in spite of the second volley that sent two Gold Gulchers reeling against one of the card tables with bullets in their brains!

The besieged now began to reply.

The Wheel of Fortune had been loosely built, and large cracks were visible where the planks had never met.

From these Rocky Rod and his men delivered some shots which sent several savages headlong from their horses.

"Make sure of Claude! Remember Rappahoe an' Santa Jim an' his pard!" exclaimed Rod. "I tell yer, boys, Claude hez come to Gold Gulch this time ter clean the hull camp out!"

The firing was now incessant.

The attacking party had withdrawn a short distance, and the Indians were making good use of Winchester rifles from behind their horses.

The Wheel of Fortune had never been intended for a fortress, and the leaden missiles therefore whistled through the pine planks.

Men fell everywhere. It was massacre!

In ten minutes not a response came from the famous den.

A flash of victory lit up the dark eyes of the person who had been called War Arrow.

"I said I'd make my last visit to Gold Gulch one long to be remembered!" he said aloud.

"I'm not yet through with it. I only wish that Starbox and his men were here. They never thought that their old player, Death Rattle, would visit the camp in this style. All this in for Poison Jack, killed by two men from Gold Gulch Camp."

The speaker was Claude Crecy, as his words have revealed.

"Now open the doors, boys."

His Indians sprung from behind their horses and rushed forward. No volley attempted to check them. They broke the door down, and thundered into the den; but the sight that met their gaze was enough to make even an Indian recoil with horror.

Everywhere lay the men who had literally died with their boots on. From the storm of lead which had swept the interior of the building, no one of the defenders had escaped alive!

Terrible, indeed, had been the road-agent's visit to Gold Gulch, but more ruthlessness was to follow.

"They never thought I was very solid with the Indians," he laughed, as his red helpers poured from the den. "Why, my first duty, when I took to the road, was to make sure of the red-skins. I didn't want white allies. Now, boys, we'll complete the job."

A strong west wind was at that moment blowing up the Gulch. Five minutes later it increased a little fire which had been kindled against one of the dry wooden shanties.

Gold Gulch Camp was doomed, all, save the Wheel of Fortune, and several other buildings from which the wind kept the devouring flames.

Suddenly Claude drew a piece of paper from an inner pocket and held it against the old gambling den while he wrote upon it.

Then he pinned it to the door with his bowie, and turned away, proud of his work.

Seventeen live Indians followed him from the doomed camp when he rode away, and the wind that carried the flames eastward fluttered the paper which he had fastened to the door of the gambling den.

Its inscription read:

"To Mr. Starbox:
The compliments of Claude Crecy! I have bid farewell to the road. These men were grit to the last."
CLAUDE.

About half a mile from Gold Gulch Camp, Claude urged his band into a gallop, and all were moving rapidly over the old stage trail, when a young Indian was seen approaching.

"The Fox—Dainty Dot's guardian!" fell from Claude's lips as he dashed ahead of his band and met the young brave.

"I am Claude!" he cried, clutching the rope bridle of the horse about to pass him. "What has happened? Why are you here?"

The Indian almost fell from the saddle, which was a blanket—as he turned to Claude.

"The Fox was watchin' the hut when 'nother Injun come up; had news for Dainty Dot from Claude, him say. The Fox b'lieve him, of course, and tell 'im to go in."

"Well?" thundered Claude as the Indian paused.

"Injun spring at the Fox all at once, throw him down an' give him a knife—see here!" and the red-skin tore off a bandage formed of pliable deer-skin and revealed a horrible gash in the right breast.

"I don't care for your scratch!" almost yelled Claude. "Dainty Dot went with the—the Indian?"

"Yes."

"That Indian game reveals the man," the road-agent exclaimed. "He always could play the red-skin to perfection. I thought I finished him in the gorge; but he is my living foe again. Well, Buckskin Frank, I accept the challenge your theft of Dainty Dot has thrown at my feet!"

A moment later Claude Crecy was shooting over the trail like a meteor.

CHAPTER XV.

A TIGER IN IRONS.

It was true, as the Indian messenger had detailed to Claude, that the mountain cabin to which he had taken Dainty Dot had been visited.

And the road-agent was correct in asserting that the man who had personated the Indian was none other than his old enemy Buckskin Frank, the detective.

A short time after receiving the tidings, Claude drew rein before the place, but the cabin door stood wide, evidence enough that the nest was empty, that Dainty Dot was no longer his forced guest.

"I am confident of it now, this is your work, Buckskin Frank!" fell in mad tones from his lips as he stared with flashing eyes into the empty hut. "Just when I had settled in full with the men of Gold Gulch, and had said farewell to the stage trails of the Rockies, you play a new game. You cross my path at a time

when I fancied you lying dead not far from here. You are hard to kill, it seems; it takes a bullet through the brain. Well, I will make sure work next time."

While Claude thus addressed himself in front of his cabin, not more than a mile away, an Indian and a white man were watching a number of rough-looking whites who were creeping along a narrow mountain trail many feet beneath them.

"The white chief who came down to Dandy Red and his brother on the rope does not lead them now," said the Indian turning to his companion.

"No, Dandy. I calkerlate that 'Mr.' Starbox sleeps in ther biggest grave in Colorado," was the reply from the white man, who never took his eyes from the men below while he spoke. "I never thought they'd find us in thet cave."

"The yellow Indian, Mexy, once fought a bear there," said Dandy Red. "Him know much about cave; but him did not seem to know, brother Zack, that a trail led from the big room to the open country."

"If he hed, Dandy, thar'd hev been none o' thet rope bizness, an' we'd not be hyar now, lookin' at thet band ov tigers who'd give their dust fur our karkisses."

The Indian smiled, and continued to watch the roughs until the last one had disappeared.

"Come, now," he said to Zack as he started up suddenly, and plunged into a mountain thicket.

"What ar' the young red up to now, I wonder?" exclaimed the old stage-driver. "He's wounded already, bad enough ter kill a man, an' yet he keeps on. He's a fool of he expects ter finish Starbox's men down thar. Sometimes I think he's crazy, but, crazyer not, ef he opens on the Gold Gulchers he kin count old Zack Dragon in ther mix. I've retired from ther road, an' I ruther like this kind o' life. It's excitin', but a little dangerous, ov course."

Dandy Red hurried Zack through the thicket at no inconsiderate speed. Rapid progress through such a place was, of course, out of the question; but the Indian pushed on until the pair emerged at last in a lonely but picturesque spot a goodly distance from the place where they had plunged into the thicket.

"Look yonder, Dandy!" suddenly exclaimed old Zack, as he grasped the Indian's arm and pointed excitedly down the bear trail that ran in front of them.

"Grizzly?" asked Dandy Red, as he turned his eyes in the direction indicated by his companion.

"Suthin' better nor a b'ar! Can't ye see Old Nick himself, standin' by thet big tree?"

If Dandy Red had been a white man, he would have uttered an exclamation of surprise and joy at sight of the person almost in full view.

"It is Claude, brother!" he said, in low tones, while his eyes fairly blazed. "Let him die where he stands."

Click! click! sounded the Indian's revolver, as he finished.

"No! you mustn't drop him!" And Zack Dragon's hand gripped Dandy Red's dark wrist. "What hex Dainty Dot been livin' fur these two years an' more? An' who hex Buckskin been huntin' ez long! No! Claude ar' not fur us, Injun. Let him go."

Dandy Red resolutely shook his head.

"Then catch 'im!" was the reply. "You've got the rope thet follered Starbox to ther bottom of ther cave, when he fell. But Claude's an old bird."

"Dandy Red no care fur that. Him comin' this way now."

The road agent was not entirely alone, as the twain noticed at the conclusion of the Indian's last sentence, for he had stepped back and mounted a horse which he was guiding over the winding bear trail.

As Starbox's fatal stirrup still remained in the rope, a running noose was soon formed, and with a significant glance at Zack, the young Indian crept nearer to the trail.

In full view Claude came on, with the eager, blazing eyes of Dandy Red fastened upon him.

The red lassoer crouched in the luxuriant growth of grass that covered the ground, but his eyes still watched his victim.

"He's locked out!" ejaculated old Zack, as he saw the road-agent ride past the spot where the Indian was concealed.

The next moment Dandy Red leaped forward and halted in the bear-trail directly behind Claude. The lasso instantly uncoiled and darted through the air like a flying serpent.

A cry, an oath pealed from the road-agent's throat, as he was jerked to the ground before he had time to draw a weapon; and as he staggered to his feet in spite of the tightening coil, he whirled and saw the demonic features of his captor.

"Dandy Red, by my life!" he exclaimed.

"An' Zack Dragon!" said a strange voice, as the old stage-driver sprung into view. "Cap'n, we've got the call on yer this time."

"That you have; but you daren't toss me a revolver."

"Whar's yourn?"

"On my horse."

Old Zack came forward with a victorious twinkle in his eyes.

"How'd ye like ter go headlong over ther old stage-trail, Claude?" he said, halting in front of the bandit. "What d'yer think I thought when I found myself fallin' down—down to—goodness knows whar? Cap'n, I hedn't time ter think ov anything. Ef I hedn't lodged on some rock-trees an' hung thar till a lot ov Injuns come along, I wouldn't be hyar with Dandy Red. You did thet trick on purpose, didn't yer, Claude?"

"Certainly I did, you fool!" was the quick retort. "You do not imagine that it was an accident, I hope."

"An' if you expect any accidents ter happen hyar, cap'n, you'll be ther worst fooled man in Colorado!"

Claude turned from Zack and faced the Indian.

"We were friends once," he said.

"Dandy Red an' Claude never friends! White man mistaken."

For a moment the baffled trail-robber looked into the glittering eyes of the young Indian. There was no mercy in their depths.

"You are going to finish me here," he said.

"A man can die but once. Go on with your work. You are going to cheat Buckskin and the girl out of long-cherished revenge. I am sati fied, if I am not to get another stroke at my hunters."

"No, brother. Dandy Red no right to take Claude's life. Thet b'long to girl or Buckskin."

A frown passed over the road-agent's countenance.

"Take me to them, then!" he hissed. "Let this long hunt terminate before sundown. This is Buckskin's victory after all, and not yours, Dandy Red. You are not going to avenge your own accident, Zack!"

The old stage-driver shook his head.

"You are not my prisoner," he said. "You belong to Dandy Red."

In front of the revolvers of the stage-driver and the Indian, Claude Crecy was conducted over the bear trail, which gradually ascended as they proceeded.

Suddenly the road-agent paused, and turned his face eastward. His eyes flashed with the fire of triumph once more.

"What would you say to that smoke if you were a citizen of Gold Gulch?" he exclaimed, addressing Zack, and then turning his eyes again to the dense columns of smoke which were rising from a large mountain gulch but 7 feet below the terrace on which they then were.

Zack and the Indian looked without reply.

"I was down there awhile ago!" resumed Claude. "I left my compliments on the door of the Wheel of Fortune. I—"

"Move on, brother! Dandy Red no care how much Gold Gulch burn," was the interruption.

The road-agent tramped on again.

Half an hour later he turned suddenly upon his captors.

"Where are we going to stop?" he demanded.

"Do you not know that Buckskin has met Dainty Dot, and that they may have fled the country? You can't find him. See here! We might as well be friends as foes. There's a big bonanza in the stage business on the Denver-Salt Lake Trail. It's better than doing the work you two are doing now. Buckskin would turn his back on both of you if he got a chance. I would bet all my dust that he has done so now."

Claude ceased and waited anxiously for his auditors' reply.

"Brother Claude can't put lies deep into Dandy Red's ears!" said the Indian before old Zack could shape a sentence. Gold Gulch have other an' better people in it by'n-by. They make the stage trail safe, an' when the iron horse of the white men rushes through the mountains, men like Claude will not have any stages to stop. Dandy Red do his duty!"

"I stand in with the Injun," said Zack.

Under his mustache Claude Crecy bit his lip.

His plan had failed, and he had naught to do but to move on again at Dandy Red's command.

Suddenly there came up from below the sharp report of a rifle, and a bullet grazed a limb so close to the Indian's head that he sprang aside with a cry.

Instantly the three cast their eyes downward from the terrace along whose edge the trail now led.

At first they saw nothing more than a little column of bluish smoke that crept skyward, but all at once Dandy Red uttered an exclamation of discovery.

"Mexy miss this time!"

"Mexy, the yaller dog?"

"Look, brother!"

Zack could see nobody among the bushes below, but he knew that Dandy Red's eyes had discovered the firer of the shot.

Mexy, the Mexican, whom we saw last with the Avengers of Gold Gulch in the cavern had failed to avenge "Mr." Starbox's death.

"Back! him shoot again, mebbe!" exclaimed Dandy Red.

At that instant the figure of the Mexican rose from among the bushes below, and as the occupants of the terrace sprang back another bullet whistled past their heads.

"I wouldn't have missed at that distance!" said Claude. "Why don't you give him a shot?"

Dandy Red sprang to the brink of the cliff and was taking a hasty aim at the man below when Claude Crecy darted forward and with a mad kick sent him whirling into the air!

It was the work of a second!

A wild shriek pealed from the terrace, and it had not died away when the road-agent wheeled upon old Zack.

"The Indian is out of your way now, Zack," he said. "What's the use of going right against your own interest? Here, cut this rope that binds my hands, and let us be pard. In a year I can send you to 'Frisco a millionaire. Pard it is, isn't it, Zack?"

"Not yet, Claude!" was the response. "Here ends your trail. I have a right to avenge my own wrongs. You attempted to take my life the other day; you have just taken Dandy Red's. He was Zack Dragon's pard, of his skin war red."

The revolver that was thrust almost into Claude's very face had a man's finger at the trigger, and flashing eyes behind it.

The next moment the road-agent would have reeled from the terrace with a bullet in his brain, if the revolver that cracked behind Zack had not sent a bullet into his arm.

The old stage-driver started back with a shriek, and Claude, too surprised to fly, stared in direction of the unexpected shot.

"At last!" fell from his lips in low tones as a man advanced. "He has saved my life that he might take it himself. But I am not dead yet."

In spite of the menace of eye and revolver, Claude turned and sprang rapidly down the cliff-skirted trail.

CHAPTER XVI.

A THREE HANDED DUEL.

"DID you do that on purpose, Buckskin?" asked Zack, holding out his wounded arm to the man who rushed forward as Claude fled.

"Yes!" said the detective. "You had forgotten that the blood of Dainty Dot's father does not call for revenge at your hands."

"But ther blood of Dandy Red did!"

The old stage-driver regarded Buckskin with flashing eyes. Blood oozed through his sleeve, and was fast staining the grass at his feet.

"We'll settle fur this at another time," he said. "If Claude Crecy belongs to you, go an' get him—if yer can!"

The detective sprang away.

He had not noticed that Claude's hands were fastened at his sides, but not long afterward he caught sight of a figure skulking over a trail some feet below him.

"My man at last!" fell from his lips as he instantly disappeared for the purpose of intercepting the skulker some distance from the place of discovery.

Suddenly Claude Crecy started back as a man stepped into his path.

The enemies were face to face once more, and one was helpless before the other.

"It is your day, Buckskin," said Claude bitterly. "Where's Dot?"

"Not here, thank heaven."

"I know that, but you know where she is?"

"Yes."

"You played the Indian messenger and robbed my retreat."

"Who told you?"

"The Indian guard."

"Then I did not finish him."

"Not quite, Buckskin."

The foes were silent for a moment.

"You know what I want, Claude," said the detective, suddenly.

"My life, of course."

"Nothing less."

"It is in your power. My hands are fastened to my body. The red-skin did it; but he will never tie another captive."

"I saw you send him headlong over the cliff."

Claude smiled grimly.

"I could not shun the splendid opportunity," he said. "But to your work, Buckskin. Two years of trailing will bring men together sometime. This is your revenge, not Dot's."

The road-agent compressed his lips like a person who is ready and even willing to meet death at the hands of a foe.

"I never shot a bound man in all my life," said Buckskin, advancing, with a knife in his left hand. "I would not shoot my worst enemy when he stood defenseless before me. I'm going to take the chances, Claude. You were merciless when you caught me in the gorge, but, by my life! I cannot serve even Claude Crecy thus."

The road-agent's eyes sunk abashed before the detective's gaze, and before he could raise them again the keen knife had severed the cords that bound his hands!

As Buckskin Frank stepped back a revolver fell at Claude's feet.

Such fairness he had not expected.

"Pick it up," said Buckskin, casting his glance upon the weapon on the ground. "We fight here for the last time. On this duel hang the fortunes of Dainty Dot."

The name made the road-agent start, and with a wild cry of eagerness he snatched the pistol from the ground and faced his hunter with it cocked in his hand.

They were ten feet apart.

"Back to back," said Buckskin Frank. "We will turn at the word 'Three,' and may the best shot win."

The next moment the two enemies stood back to back on the lonely dueling ground.

"Ready!" asked the detective over his shoulder.

"Ready!" came firmly back.

"One—two—three!"

The men wheeled at the same time.

Two revolvers went up, but instead of their reports a rifle cracked at Claude's left, and with a cry the road-agent reeled from the astonished detective whose finger was about to press the trigger!

"Dot!" fell from the man-hunter's lips as he beheld the girlish figure standing erect not twenty rods away.

The girl came forward.

"This had to be. I had sworn it!" she said, calmly, as her gaze met the Buckskin's rebuking look. "Two years ago that man ruthlessly shot my father in a stage he had stopped to plunder. You might have known when you left me awhile ago, that I could not remain alone when you were on the trail of the man whose life belonged to Colonel Berdan's daughter. Come, let us go now, I am satisfied. Gold Gulch has lost Dainty Dot forever, and Buckskin Frank leaves his last trail, does he not?"

The beautiful eyes of the girl avenger were fastened on the face of the silent, thoughtful man before her.

"I would that the blood of Claude Crecy was not on your hands, Dot," he said.

"The oath was mine and the vengeance had to be!" was her reply. "It was fate, too. The gun that avenged my father belonged to the man it slew. He took it from the cabin, you know, when you played Indian and took me away."

The stage trails of Colorado were to have rest.

It was meet that Claude Crecy should fall by the hand of the girl whom he had brutally orphaned.

If she had recognized him in the person of Death Rattle, the gambler, a large part of this wild romance would never have been written.

On Claude's person was found the shell case watch which he had taken from one of the Congressmen in the stage which we lately saw him stop. The photograph on the inside of the case turned out to be the portrait of his own sister, who never learned, let us hope, anything of the career and fate of her wayward brother.

Not long afterward Buckskin Frank and Dot arrived in Denver.

"I'll take it all back, Buckskin," said a rough-looking individual to the western detective on the street one day. "I guess, arter all, ther gal had the best right ter Claude; but ef yer hedn't pinked my arm when I hed him in front ov my revolver, she wouldn't have taken vengeance. The old arms' well now, Buckskin, an' I've got a new stage-route."

The speaker was Zack Dragon.

Dandy Red was not instantly killed by being hurled from the terrace by the enraged Claude, but he died soon after the terrible descent, among the bushes.

He was a brave red-skin, generous to a fault among his friends, and one who never forgot a favor. The rescue of his dog months before the date of our story by the detective had given birth to a friendship which peril tested, and death alone brought to an end.

We can safely say that Buckskin Frank never forgot his red ally, and to-day he often tells the story of the Indian who remembered the Alamosa.

The avenging band led by "Mr." Starbox, returned to the desolation of Gold Gulch, but their leader lay in the mountain cave at the end of his last trail.

Gold Gulch Camp was almost entirely destroyed; but industry rebuilt a part of it, and it once more became the abode of men as rough as those whom we have seen die at the revolver's muzzle.

Frank Fargo has left off man-hunting and, with the handsome wife whom he won in the West, where many a trail is red, lives many miles from the scenes of his last long hunt.

Let us leave him here to say that the man cracking his whip over the heads of the stage team, just now coming around yon mountain elbow, is our old acquaintance, Zack Dragon.

He is careful to shun the rebuilt Gold Gulch Camp, for, as he says, "It mightn't be healthy fur Zack down thar, you know."

THE END.

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